

## Helium

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## Helium

by [tbhyourelame](#)

### Summary

After years of online calls, late night texting, and out of sync sleep schedules, Sapnap and George finally visit Florida. Dream's aspiration to truly know himself is met with the return of missed chances, and uncertainty. Placed in the dead center of his humid, overwhelming life, he and George are bound to confront the inevitable.

*“Has it rained?” George asks suddenly.*

*Dream’s thoughts snap away from the drifting green and cloudless sky, returning to earth once more. His lips part in silence.*

*George’s voice was soft when he’d uttered the words, and for a reason he cannot place, Dream finds himself glancing to the back of Sapnap’s head before responding, “Since... summer?”*

-  
unfinished/on hiatus

# Brotherhood

## Chapter Notes

Welcome back to the series, quick reminders before we get started!

### PLEASE READ:

Please, do NOT mention this work in CC's streams, donations, chats, or comment sections. This extends beyond those mentioned in the fic, and to CC's of any kind, including the musicians/band. Though this work falls safely under boundaries that have been publicly stated, I do not in any way encourage the conversation of this material anywhere that could bring discomfort to other groups. If it is kept within the community, then I'll happily keep progressing the story. I can assure that this time around I won't hesitate to discontinue, should circumstances fall to that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Purple and blue lights wash over wooden floors, where colorful bowling balls slip and roll until colliding with pins. Neon strips outline the separation of lanes. Beneath the seventies-style synth that floats from ceiling speakers, glowing screens and bright banners capture families' scores, upcoming events, and Dream's desperation to even the board with a perfect strike.

Ten-pins crash in far corners of the wide alley. The slick bottom of shoes clack lightly on the polished ground.

Dream stares down the green sphere as it glides on the wood, and to his horror, curves left. His head tilts in disappointment as it misses the mark entirely, and drops into the gutter.

“There we go!” Sapnap calls from behind him, and he groans. “You sure you don’t want the bumpers on?”

Dream hovers by the dispenser as he waits for the ball to return. “Can the *next* one be our try-hard game?”

“No way. You can’t keep saying that every time you screw up.”

They’d arrived at the buzzing alley to seriously settle days of competitive banter, but wound up doing the opposite. The first hoard of rounds are marked by a series of red fouls—Sapnap and Dream kept sneaking shoes over the boundary line during each other’s turns, cackling at the loud alarms and shoving each other away. Quickly after, the games delved into inventing the most ridiculous methods possible to hit even a singular pin.

In their *real* games, Sapnap has been winning with little mercy.

Dream’s second try leaves his fingers with grace, light glinting off the shiny surface, and barrels into three pins before disappearing behind the lane.

“This shouldn’t count,” he argues feebly, for what may be the third time in the past hour.

Sapnap huffs. “You’re such a baby.”

Dream sulks back to their table, and eyes the greasy pizza and fries dwindling before them. “Stop calling me that.”

He aimlessly bats away balled up napkins on the cluttered surface.

Lounging in the plastic swivel-chair, Sapnap grins up at him with a dixie cup pressed to his lips. “Since I’m destroying you, I think I can call you whatever I want.”

Dream spares a glance up at the bright-colored scoreboard, where several large *X*’s stand next to the name ‘*shitnap*,’ while he has close to none.

He lowers himself into the chair opposite while Sapnap presses on the controller screen. “When did you get so good at bowling? I crushed you last time we were here.”

He makes an empty-grabbing motion towards the soda pitcher.

Sapnap nudges the container towards him. “That was like, five years ago.” He smiles again, wickedly. “People change.”

Dream narrows his eyes at him. “Why are you so—” He looks at the scoreboard again. “Oh my god, can you stop changing my name, please?”

Sapnap giggles with indifference.

“It’s your turn,” Dream complains. “Go already.”

Sapnap gracefully exits his seat, grabs his sparkly, pink bowling-ball off of the rack, and approaches their lane.

Dream leans towards the table’s monitor and hastily deletes ‘*parrot boy*’ from the scoreboard.

Moments later, he hears a crash, and his eyes leap past Sapnap’s shoulders to see four pins fall into the dark backdrop. The white fabric of Sapnap’s t-shirt glows blue under the faint blacklights. When he tosses Dream a smile, his teeth are illuminated too.

As he comes back to retrieve his ball, the music overhead dies, then repeats again.

“Did we really have to come on retro night?” Sapnap asks, heaving the rounded, pink beauty to his chest.

Dream smiles. “Retro night is the best, dude.”

Sapnap disagrees, then sinks his second attempt down the lane. It skims the left hand pin, they watch it wobble—but the cluster remains unflinchingly upright.

Dream cheers, Sapnap swears about his lost spare, and they both fall silent when a nearby family casts them yet another disapproving look. After an awkward exchange, Dream meets his eyes, and they burst into laughter again.

They’ve been coasting in each other’s company for six, sunny days. Their time has been filled with stupid jokes and late night burger runs and loud, chaotic streaming. Patches has slowly warmed up to the new company; during Dream’s daily search to collect her before breakfast, he found her this morning curled up on the foot of Sapnap’s bed. After Sapnap made one too many jokes about stealing her affection, Dream tried to pass off the job of feeding her since she “clearly loves her Sappy-poo so much.”

Sapnap ensured he'd only make her meals, if Dream made all of his. Dream refused.

With both the easy-going and irritating moments, seeing Sapnap has been a breath of fresh air. From the moment Dream nearly had the life squeezed out of him in the airport terminal, to the second he tries to nudge Sapnap's chair from beneath him at the bowling table—he's felt grounded.

"Leave my seat alone," Sapnap complains, shoving away Dream's red and green shoes.

As he slumps into his chair, Dream studies their feet underneath the table. "I think I kinda like these."

Sapnap looks down. "The shoes?"

"Yeah," Dream says. "They're cool."

"Are you gonna steal from the bowling alley?"

Dream frowns. "Stop trying to make me do that."

"Come on, dude," Sapnap says, "up your shoe game. Twitter will finally stop roasting you."

"I don't think that's possible," Dream muses.

"Don't be humble. They simp when you breathe."

Dream grins, pulling out his phone. "Oh, you think so?"

They've been documenting snippets of their time together whenever it naturally surfaces. He's always disliked how the clicking shutter of his camera removes him from the present moment, and jails him in a paradox of his own making. He yearns to capture the world around him, yet in doing so, is removed from the present and concerned with future memories he has yet to create.

He's been trying, lately, to forgive himself for only existing in the here, and now. Most of his camera roll was only sent to George, anyway.

His immersion in his digital world has been on a steady decline. For the curious hearts of his viewers, though, he's posted a few clips and snapshots here and there. Sapnap's been idly slipping onto his phone more than Dream would've expected him to.

He kicks his feet up on the nearby chair, shifting his ankles to display the leather shoes.

"Okay, well, if you're showing off—" Sapnap shoves his blue and black pair onto the seat as well. "Get mine in there, too."

Dream takes the photo, laughing. "Your feet are tiny." He earns a kick to his calf. "What should I caption it?"

"How about, 'matching shoes with my boo,'" Sapnap suggests.

"Fuck off."

"Let me write it." Sapnap nudges him, then draws his feet away. "Please."

"No," Dream says.

Sapnap pauses, and carefully adds, “I’ll help you clean, later.”

Dream hands him his phone immediately. As Sapnap begins to type away on the Twitter screen, he says, “I hope you know I’m gonna hold you to that.”

Sapnap waves a hand dismissively. He giggles. “Okay, okay. I tweeted it.”

He extends it back to Dream, who grabs it quickly to assess the damage of Sapnap’s free speech.

On top of the photo of their ridiculous footwear, it reads:

*Hey @GeorgeNotFound do you like my shoes? :)*

He chuckles a wad of napkins across the table. “Sapnap!”

The numbers on the tweet climb exponentially, while Sapnap suffers from a fit of laughter. A few stray napkins find their way back into Dream’s lap.

“Please don’t give me another thing to worry about,” Dream says, tossing his phone onto the table.

“I won’t, I won’t.” Sapnap’s amusement fades into light seriousness. “I swear.”

Dream’s phone hums before them. He leans over it to read the notification on his screen. “Oh my god.” His fingers quickly begin to tap away. “He replied.”

Sapnap scoots up in his chair eagerly. “What’d he say?”

Dream skims over the response, then laughs, then reads it again. A muted feeling settles in his chest, controlled and temperate. “He said, ‘ha-ha, who’s that girl next to you.’”

“My feet are *not* that small,” Sapnap retorts in disdain. “You’re just a giant. I hate him so much.”

“Yeah, me too,” Dream says fondly, watching as Sapnap rapidly types a response to appear in their thread.

The tweet is something along the lines of how Sapnap usually expresses his excitement for meeting George—related to some sort of height-checking or violence when he finally flies in. Dream hardly bats an eye at it now.

Their banter dies into mindlessly munching on food. Dream hums to the faint disco tunes that cozy their silence.

“So,” Sapnap muffles through a mouthful, tossing pizza crust onto the center tin. “Tomorrow’s the day.”

Dream nods solemnly. “It is.”

“How you feelin’?”

“Alright,” Dream says. His fingers pass through his hair, briefly. “Excited, I guess.”

Sapnap peers at him quietly.

“Maybe I should be more nervous,” Dream continues, “but I don’t know. When we’ve talked, it’s been fine.”

“In person is different, though,” Sapnap points out cautiously.

Dream gestures between them. “Not really.”

Sapnap burps. “True.”

“I don’t know,” Dream repeats, hands fiddling with a napkin and folding it repeatedly. “In my session yesterday, he said I seemed genuinely ready to see George. He said, ‘you sound like you’re ready.’ I’m kinda riding off that.”

Sapnap’s eyebrows raise. “Well, that’s good.” After a moment, he asks, “What do you think?”

“About what?”

“You said *he* thinks you’re ready,” Sapnap clarifies. “What do *you* think? Are you ready?”

“I...” The easy words of affirmation weigh heavily in his mouth, unspeakable. His brows pinch together. “I guess I’m not sure. It’s not like I can afford to be anything but ready, because it’s going to happen no matter what. But we...we’re friends, y’know? That always comes first.”

“Sure,” Sapnap says.

They regard each other for a tense second.

“Can we come back to this later?” Dream asks gently.

Sapnap nods.

Lights flash from a cartoony animation dancing across a nearby scoreboard. When families in nearby lanes knock down a plethora of pins, the sound is sharp, but satisfying.

“You think once a week is working?” Sapnap asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” Dream says lightly. “Might bump it down to twice a month, soon.”

Sapnap chuckles.

“What?”

He runs a hand over his stubbled jaw, as if to keep the words from slipping out. “Dunno, man.”

“Come on.” Dream smiles. “Say it.”

Sapnap huffs. “You really want me to?”

“Go for it,” he assures.

Sapnap’s eyes raise to lock dead on Dream, as he says, “You’re like, speed-running therapy.”

Dream begins to laugh abruptly, before he can stop himself. “Oh my god. Shut up.” Sapnap’s nose and eyes scrunch up with deep amusement, his smile contagious. “I’m *not*, you idiot—I’m actually making progress—”

“How many pearls do you have so far?” Sapnap interrupts.

“How many—you’re so annoying, it’s not even funny.”

Sapnap refuses to let up. “Did you find the stronghold yet?”

“I hate you,” Dream says, but his face is plastered with a dopey grin.

It’s easy. It’s everything.

They settle again, and slip into an air of ease that is gentle, and contemplative.

Sapnap clears his throat. “Really though, Dream,” he says, “I know sometimes you don’t want me to talk about this stuff, but...you seem really happy.” Dream pulls a dubious face, to which Sapnap quickly backpedals. “Okay, well, happy and complicated. You’re always complicated.”

“Thank you,” Dream says, “Sapnap.”

“Shut up. Just...it’s like, before, you were happy because you were *supposed* to be. But now you’re starting to be happy because you *are*.” He meets Dream’s eyes earnestly. “It’s pretty fucking awesome to see that.”

Shock skitters through Dream’s bones. He’s still getting used to the lightness in his lungs.

“Thanks,” he breathes, “I...I really appreciate that. I—” He laughs shortly. “I don’t really know what to say. Give me a second.”

As they pause, a voice crackles through the speakers overhead that asks for the owner of a wallet left in the colorful arcade. Sapnap and Dream had considered buying tickets to waste time there for a while, but once they saw a hoard of elementary schoolers running around the fluorescent machines, they backed off.

They’ve clearly outgrown their younger selves, who spent four hours losing money and beating high scores until their eyes went dry, and Dream’s mother dragged them away.

Well, *almost* outgrown. They did stay up playing Minecraft till five in the morning the night before.

“I do all of this work,” Dream starts slowly, “you know—the stuff we’ve talked about. Routines and the journaling and shit.”

Sapnap nods curtly.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with myself recently and it’s—it’s easy to think I’m doing okay, all on my own,” he continues. “But it’s kind of hard to trust. So...having someone else point that out, that I could be on the right path, is really something.” He smiles. “Really. Thank you.”

“You’re adorable,” Sapnap says, swiftly shattering any traces of solemnity rising between them.

Dream scoffs, and then they bicker, and then return to bowl the rest of their game.

Eventually, they part ways from the noisy alley and sigh in relief as the synth-music is lifted from their ears. The sun has hardly dipped below the horizon, dark shadows of cars in the parking lot contrasting the dimming, orange sky.

Sapnap asks for the keys. Dream rolls his eyes.

He’s given the aux instead.

After hours of muffled music and squeaking bowling shoes, it’s pleasant to hear Sapnap’s playlists

crackle through the speakers and blanket their ride home. He muses to Dream about how he and Karl pour over their Spotify creations religiously every few weeks, and Dream patiently reminds him he's been told this before.

Darkness has nearly settled when they park outside Dream's house. He has a faint thought that calls quietly when his keys jingle against the front door, and Sapnap waits for it to swing open.

*Next time we come home, his mind whispers, George will be here, too.*

They enter the house and are greeted with the mess they've created over the past week. Old wrappers, dirty dishes, pizza boxes—all cluttering the open surfaces and suddenly more noticeable than Dream had cared for when they'd left. It reeks, a minuscule amount, of old food.

As Dream nudges aside old energy drinks to empty his pockets on the kitchen island, Sapnap quickly skirts to the living room.

"Hey," Dream says sharply. "No. You said you'd help me clean."

"That doesn't sound like me," Sapnap calls, as Dream watches him disappear over the pony-walled counter.

After grabbing a trash bag for 'cleanup duty,' Dream makes his way out of the kitchen in tired pursuit. "Don't make me do this again."

"Don't make me clean," Sapnap's muffled voice floats from where he's sunken into the couch.

Dream sighs at the fluff of Sapnap's hair he can make out from beyond the tall cushions. A gentle clack of keys signals that his guard is down.

"Any last words?" Dream asks, rhetorically.

"Hold on, I'm texting—"

His hands find the backside of the couch as he leaps over it with practiced ease, landing heavily on Sapnap's chest and crashing their bodies together.

A deflated wheeze leaves Sapnap's lungs.

"You said you'd help," Dream repeats, hopping slightly to elicit another pained breath from below him. "You pinky-promised."

"I *didn't*," Sapnap forces out, but his hand claps Dream's back as a sign of resignation.

He grins as he rises to his feet, sparing a glance down at Sapnap who doubles over dramatically in a fit of coughs.

"I think," he rasps, "you broke a rib."

Dream starts to pick up the trash strewn on the coffee table before them. "You're fine."

With one last unnecessary cough, Sapnap slowly sits up. "Where do I even start?"

Dream gestures to the garbage in his hands. "Here. Or we could start upstairs, if that's easier."

Sapnap rubs his chest. "I don't have to clean *my* room for him."

Dream busies himself by stacking cups and stuffing them with old napkins.

“And *his* room is definitely fine,” Sapnap continues, trying and failing to catch Dream’s eye. “You’ve checked on it, like, five times—”

“Shut up,” Dream mumbles.

“It’s okay if everything isn’t picture perfect. He’s just a guy.”

The thin, white trash bag in Dream’s hands clings with static as he opens it. His hands move with seemingly automated motion, intensely focused with shoving contents inside and brushing leftovers from the table.

Briskly, he says, “I know.”

“He’s not gonna care if there’s crumbs, or dust—*dude*, slow down.” Sapnap takes the bag away from Dream’s grip. “And sit for a second.”

He looks at his empty hands, then the concern knitting Sapnap’s brow, and lowers himself to the couch.

Sapnap slowly hands the trash back to him. “Take it easy. Alright?”

“Sorry, I just—this helps me feel in control,” he mutters. The plastic is warm when it returns to his fingers.

“Okay,” Sapnap says, “we’ll get to cleaning in a second, then. What’s going on?”

“The house is filthy.”

“Clay.”

He exhales, long and slow. “I guess,” he says, “I’m more nervous than I thought.”

“Do you want to, um—what’s that thing you said?” Sapnap asks in a jumble. “After we got Quiznos.”

Under tall, fluorescent street-lamps, they’d reclined in Dream’s car with warm sandwiches in hand. The slow moving darkness of the night caused them to sink. They chatted, through mouthfuls of food, about why the still air and empty spaces of parking lots elicit such conversations.

Sapnap noted Dream’s words seem to weigh in his mouth with more kindness than they used to.

Dream chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed the taste of sourdough down his tongue. He explained a token of advice he’d been given, for whenever he feels he can barely speak at all:

*Talk it dead. Talk through it until I can’t talk anymore. Till my words are gone, and there’s nothing left to say—only then should I retreat to silence.*

“Talk it dead,” Dream recites.

Sapnap leans back into the couch cushions. “Right. Hit me.”

“What...what if it’s a trick?” he questions, his voice small.

“I’m not tricking you—”

“No, not *you*—me,” Dream says, exasperated. “What if I really am faking it? I know I feel better than I used to, and you think I seem better than I used to, but what if it’s all...pseudo progress. Fake healing. Fake everything.”

Sapnap frowns slowly.

“George...” Dream’s tone softens. “George has a way of knocking me down when I least expect it. In ways I never know are possible.” His palm rubs against the back of his neck, in an attempt to soothe the tension threaded there. “I feel like I’ve been rising, somehow. Getting somewhere, in this little bubble we’ve created.” He meets Sapnap’s eyes, unwavering. “It’s gotta pop eventually.”

The quiet between them is reflective; Dream listening to the echo of his words ring, Sapnap collecting his own. The trash bag in his hand droops Dream’s wrist down to the floor.

“I mean...if it pops,” Sapnap says, “then it pops.”

Dream stares at him.

“You guys have been sitting on this thing for a while. I think...I think it’s going to be better if we go into it expecting something to change.” Sapnap’s eyes break away. “George didn’t agree to come, thinking that everything will stay the same. He’s not stupid.”

“You think I’m stupid?” Dream asks lightly.

Sapnap sighs. “No, Dream. I don’t.”

His gaze drops to trace stray knots on the carpet.

It’s hard, sometimes, to forget the nights he’s called Sapnap over the past few months, and received no answer. It was worse when he picked up, when it meant Dream had to say what his heart was threatening to spill.

The loneliness was raw. The loneliness has been grounding. He’d looped and fallen several times, scuffed himself with dirt. Slowly, in Dr. Lauren’s office the next week, he’d put his pieces back together.

He meets Sapnap’s eyes again. He’s told him this.

They study each other for a moment, before Sapnap asks, “You ready to get started?”

Dream nods.

They delve into decluttering and collecting items, fussing over cleaning supplies. Dream makes too many jabs about his friend’s poor tidying skills. Sapnap lets it slip that his mother visits to clean his house once a month, and Dream hardly lets him live it down.

“Are you serious? When was the last time you vacuumed your own apartment?” Dream questions, while plugging in the purple and white machine.

Sapnap shrugs, fluffing pillows. “I dunno. Probably around the time I moved out, so, ten months ago? Maybe a year.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

He scoffs. “I live like, a few blocks away. And I take her out to dinner and stuff after. It’s not that big of a deal.” Sapnap turns to look at the contraption in Dream’s hands. “That’s an ugly fucking

vacuum, dude.”

Dream extends the plastic handle towards him. “You wanna help?”

“No,” Sapnap dismisses quickly. “Suck it up on your own.”

Dream rolls his eyes and flicks the on switch, accustomed to the rumble that stirs against his palm. He’s fallen into a manageable routine of chores around the house; dusting, sweeping, even repainting the empty office he intends to move his setup into. Sapnap’s arrival and contagious habit of being a mild slob lured Dream away from that abruptly.

While he runs the vacuum over the carpet, Sapnap fusses with their boxy speaker in the kitchen.

“Do you want to connect?” Sapnap asks, setting it on the marbled counter. “My phone is dead.”

“Play whatever.” Dream opens his phone and tosses it to Sapnap, his eyebrows shooting up with worry as it’s nearly fumbled against the tile floor.

“What are you in the mood for?”

Dream nudges a toy of Patches’ away from the vacuum’s bristles. “Just go to my Spotify, I don’t care.”

Music begins to fall from the speaker, snippets of songs off of Dream’s likes that Sapnap skips through with disinterest. He settles on a private playlist of Dream’s, and they continue working. The loud melodies play while they clean and pass jokes, eventually moving to the kitchen, where Sapnap attends more to playing ‘DJ’ instead of wiping down the counters.

Dream has already stolen the dormant, damp rag from Sapnap’s grasp when a familiar song trickles into the air around them.

*Road shimmer, wigglin’ the vision...*

He waves a dismissive hand without batting an eye. “Skip it, skip it.”

Sapnap skips it.

A different one comes on, strong with bass and rhythmic drums.

“I like this one,” Sapnap muses.

Dream hums along lightly. “Didn’t you play this, like, four times after my stream the other day?”

“I didn’t,” Sapnap says.

Dream glances at him, because he *did*.

The curiosity is swept away alongside the sauce stains on the marble. Dream tosses the wet cloth to Sapnap, grinning at the grey splotch it leaves on his shoulder.

A collection of upbeat, ‘*happy hormone*’ songs filter through the vibrant kitchen. Dishes are stacked; trash is collected. Older music that they both attribute to their parent’s influence brings laughter between them, and it carries through the house, down the hall, to the laundry room where Sapnap *finally* starts a load.

The vibrations from the speaker swirls around Dream’s head, as they dance, and head-bang

ridiculously, and slide on the slick floor in socks.

“Can he do it, ladies and gentlemen? Redemption, after hours of wiping the floor with his face for my victory—”

“Move your feet,” Dream complains. Music thumps heavily from behind him.

Sapnap steps back from the triangular arrangement of empty soda cans and water bottles on the floor. “He lines up for the shot.”

Dream dramatically mimics his bowling stance, palms cupping the dusty tennis ball they’d found under a table in the foyer.

“Grand prize of six thousand dollars if he makes this, folks,” Sapnap says gravely, and the corners of Dream’s mouth twitch upwards.

He breaks his concentration on the faux pins to glance at Sapnap. “Really?”

He watches as Sapnap’s hands dive into the pocket of his sweats, grasping around sporadically. “Uh, more like...” He tugs out a few coins, and stray bills wrapped around an old receipt. “Two dollars and six cents.”

“Big money,” Dream breathes. His fingers curl around the ball.

Sapnap nods. “The biggest.”

The fuzzy green rolls down his palm as he releases it, watching it bounce and glide across the narrow hall.

It barrels into the plastic bottles, sending them rattling against the wooden floor. Triumph tips them all onto their sides—except one that remains upright.

Sapnap nudges it over with a light kick. Dream whoops.

“Give me,” Dream says, “my money.” He’s handed the payment and the receipt, unfolding the inked purchases on the paper. He frowns. “Did we really buy that many beef sticks?”

“Yeah, dude.” Sapnap bends to rearrange the bottles back into the proper lineup. “You farted up a storm.”

Dream rolls his eyes, and they fall back into homemade bowling and singing along to whatever spills from the speaker.

Their tunes are interrupted as a brief ping echoes through the house from the speaker. Dream slides and nearly loses his footing as he grabs his phone from the counter.

Sapnap continues to loudly serenade him in the distance.

Breathless from a poor rendition of a low-toned rap verse, Dream unlocks his screen to view the text.

His heart rate quickly flutters to an impossible height.

*Tomorrow at eleven, George sent.*

The grin that blooms across Dream’s face is impossibly bright, warming his cheeks and squeezing

his eyes. His teeth sink into his lower lip to keep himself at bay.

The older texts above his message detail the light-hearted conversation about bowling they'd shared from hours earlier, until Sapnap won his first strike, and Dream absently forgot to respond.

George has been reaching out to Dream more frequently in the past week. He'll curiously prod about Sapnap's trip, the September weather, and any other casual topic they choose to settle on.

Dream can't help but feel that it's a *choice*, still, for their conversations to be casual. Nearly two months of repression and filtering hasn't pushed them to bland disinterest. He can't help but feel as if there's a reserved charge waiting beneath the surface, weighed down by the two words they'd agreed upon in summer.

He calls it wishful thinking. Yesterday, his therapist called it hope.

After taking a moment to calm the excitement rattling in his fingers, Dream types back.

*Tomorrow at eleven*, he repeats.

Once shut off, the phone is pulled to his chest, and rests against his sternum lightly. He takes in a deep breath.

*Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.*

His smile is nearly painful.

As he and Sapnap continue to clean and putter around the house, he thinks about the small message that sits beneath his text for the rest of the night.

The small receipt, that says: *Read at 9:09pm.*

## Chapter End Notes

Hi hi everyone :D Hope you're all doing well, it's been a minute! I've been busy and was waiting for the right time to begin uploading again, but finally felt life has calmed enough to hop back in there.

I had a lot of fun with this beginning sequence, since I very much enjoy writing these two. I thought about focusing on their week alone for longer than just one chapter, but I felt like they deserved a bit of privacy, lol. George will be joining 'em soon :)

The pacing of this work is going to be pretty slow, and most likely uploads will be as well. Long haul and all that <3 I'm thinking maybe two-ish weeks per chapter, but it may change circumstantially. Still getting a feel for a lot of things, the rating may not stay the same as well, but yeah hopefully this will be a more relaxing go-around for all of us :) Love you sm and ty for reading!

## Here

### Chapter Summary

With George's flight to Orlando finally inbound, Dream is once again forced to confront his feelings.

### Chapter Notes

Important:

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The green lanyard wrapped around Dream's fingers unravels quickly as he twirls his palm. Metal rattles against metal, keys cutting through the air, spinning in wide motion. Rings and the dangling blob figurine he'd been sent months prior bounce off the back of his knuckles.

"We're going to be late," he repeats. He glances at the time on his phone, again.

"He's late to everything, so it's fine," Sapnap's voice carries through the muffled wall.

Dream snaps the keys into his hand, then lets them drop again. "Are you being slow on purpose?"

"Yes," Sapnap says, as he rounds the corner.

He's wearing one of the nicer button downs they'd purchased since their 'boys trip' to the mall, which ate up most of their time on his third day in town. The maroon material and unkempt collar clash with his board-shorts. The sight alone proves Dream's suspicions that yes, of course, he'd spent far more energy picking out his own outfit than Sapnap would bother to in his lifetime. In the five minutes he'd spent fussing with his hair in the mirror, Sapnap was probably able to dress himself haphazardly without a second thought.

Dream glances down at his soft blue shirt and over-washed jeans with trickling doubt.

"Here's your *smoothie*, by the way," Sapnap interrupts his thoughts, extending a dark thermos in his hands. "You're welcome."

Dream frowns. "Oh." He must have absently left it on the kitchen counter in his rush to exit.  
"Thanks."

Sapnap steps past him through the open entrance, tugging down a pair of sunglasses buried in his hair at the first attack of light. Dream squints at the brightness as he locks the front door behind them.

He pauses. "Are those mine?"

Sapnap nudges the brown frames slightly down the bridge of his nose, and peers at Dream over the top of the lenses. "They look better on me."

Dream reaches out and shoves the sunglasses back up onto his face abruptly, pushing the plastic into the space between Sapnap's brows. He grins around the metal straw between his teeth when Sapnap angrily bats his hand away.

He draws a sip from the smoothie as they make their way down the driveway to his car. "I put in way too much peanut butter," he mumbles.

"I told you." Sapnap falls silent for a moment when tugging on the passenger handle, before noting, "Y'know, you're looking a little..." He hesitates. "You good?"

Dream doesn't respond, and instead slopes into the driver's seat, closing the door with a slam that shakes the frame.

"Or are you bad?" Sapnap half-concludes as he eases himself into the car. Dream sighs, and he persists, "Which is it, Dream? Good, bad...or ugly?"

"You're not going to make me rewatch that movie," Dream says. He sets his disappointment of a smoothie in the center cup-holder.

They've held a series of televised-centric nights that glue them to his living room couch, talking incessantly over important lines and hushing each other at exciting scenes. Bowls of chips and splattering salsa had brought them to the very heart of Sapnap's wish to 'fuck off like a cowboy and ride into the sunset.' Apparently, Dream doesn't respect the cinematic art that is '*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.'

"You didn't even *watch* it," Sapnap defends quickly. "You spent the entire time complaining about guns."

He shoves his keys into the ignition. "Because it's over *three hours*, Sapnap. None of your precious 'spaghetti westerns' deserve to eat up that much of my time."

"Take that back." He can feel Sapnap's temper simmer next to him. "Right now."

"No," Dream says, lips quirking into a light smile.

Sapnap lifts his sunglasses to peer at his expression. "Okay, you're smiling. So you're good, right?"

The grin slides off his face as they return to his blatant workaround of the question. Turning his keys and shuddering the car from its slumber, he mutters, "I hate how calm you are."

Sapnap's seat-belt whirs, and metal clicks into place. "Is that a no?"

“Are you nervous?” Dream presses hopefully, glancing at the rearview mirror before reaching to adjust it slightly.

“Well, yeah,” Sapnap says. “Of course I am.”

He shifts the car into reverse, and begins to pull out of the driveway. His hand rests on the back of Sapnap’s chair as he asks, “About what?”

His answer is vague. “A lot of things.”

Dream smiles. “Then tell me.”

Sapnap sighs, then begins to explain minor grievances that weigh on him about upcoming work, home issues, and his excitement that muddles with anxiety surrounding meeting friends in real life. He notes how he often is caught between shyness, or being too bold, and at times it becomes hard for him to tell if he’s acting true to himself. Both he and Dream acknowledge the unique quality of their own friendship, and the casualty that comes with it. His voice tips into an absent ramble that puts them at ease until they fall silent.

Dream drums his fingers on the steering wheel, attention flitting between signs and flashes of palm trees that pass them by. Sapnap mindlessly taps away on his phone.

“Can you play some music?” he asks, unable to keep the edge from his voice.

Sapnap connects to the aux wordlessly.

A relieved exhale pushes the smell of dusty vents from Dream’s nose when songs fill the quiet car. His eyes sweep over the sunny, flat roads as he drifts back to his texts with George.

Late last night, George had sent: *Airport is stuffy. Dislike very much.*

Dream had grinned from his shell of sheets and covers, and typed back, *Not too busy, I hope?*

*Just boarded*, George said. *Guy next to me smells like cologne.*

*On a scale from a light spritz to full on bottle-dumping*, Dream proposed, *how much cologne are we talking about?*

Quickly, George responded, *Like he bathed in a channel of palm oil.*

Dream’s amusement tumbled clumsily into high nerves when George texted again.

*Taking off*, it read. *See u in nine hours.*

His pulse pressed sporadically against the lining of his skull; throat tight. He’d wanted to send it, the words that have lived in him since summer, but knew the text wasn’t worth the trouble of fighting George’s airplane mode.

His head voiced it instead, repeating on every downbeat of his heart: *See you then.*

*See you soon*, he thinks as another playlist of Sapnap’s begins to decline. *Very soon.*

Multiple chimes interrupt the music coming from the car’s busted speakers, bringing Dream back down to the converging lanes in front of him. The notifications from Sapnap’s phone blink through the chorus of a song.

Dream glances at him. “Noisy ringer you’ve got there.”

“Sorry,” Sapnap mumbles, switching his phone into complete silence.

Dream knows George is surely landing any minute now. His hands knead the steering leather, caught in repetition. He knows he’s almost here, touching down in Florida, swept by humid air and shifting palm trees. He wonders if his hair will be riddled with static from hours of pressing against the plane seat, or if he slept through the sunrise above the clouds.

*What am I supposed to say to him?*

He swipes a strand from where it tickles his eyebrows.

*What is he supposed to say to me?*

He checks the clock; they’re making good time. He should feel steadier, and shouldn’t let the whispers of worry and hesitation grow in the back-burning of his head. He’s worked for this; he’s ready for this.

*Right?*

A few, gentle notes of a song slip subtly into the air, lost in the rush coming from the vents and hum of the road beneath his tires. Dream absently nudges the volume upwards to listen, before returning his hand to the wheel.

9:09

*You gonna call it or am I?*

*One more time*

*This puppy love is out of line*

His eyes slowly widen at the road before him. Sapnap reclines in the passenger seat, adjusting the sunglasses up away from his face, contently unaware.

*One more slide*

*And then we’re back to real life.*

Dream’s heart begins to pound; his breath escapes him. The lyrics unfold, and unopen in him, again. Again. Again.

He’s lifted into the memory of hearing the first song under the clouds of his bathroom steam. He catches wind of George’s laugh, and breezes by his whispers. He remembers the late night calls that he misses from deep earth; their fighting, their crying, their silence. The ample wounds and pain that split them both, wide open.

The way they left it all. Waiting, and collecting dust.

*I guess I want you more than I thought I did.*

“Dream?” Sapnap questions sharply. The turn signal clicks on the dash in faded matching of the song’s beat.

*Now that I know that part of you’s not part of this.*

The car pulls to the side of the road, stopping quickly to not bump the dormant vehicle curbed before them. Grass and green bend in the windshield. Whizzing traffic complains with loud horns at Dream's sudden parking.

“Why are we—”

“Stop,” Dream says, hands gripping the wheel. “Stop talking.”

Sapnap turns fully in his seat at the bluntness in Dream's tone. His eyes dump worry upon him.

Wordlessly, they sit in the rumbling car as Dream lets every line of the song sink in him. Time fades away as the soft words and hollow memories tangle in his head with bliss. Yet the growing fear in him knows he's minutes away from seeing George, after everything.

His heart aches, after everything.

He leans away from the wheel, hands loosely sliding down and falling into his lap. He huffs as his back collides with the warm seat.

The music shifts into a gentle rhythm, carrying a pensive air that trickles light into his mind; the lines have melted away into dream-like bliss. He feels it envelop him, a simultaneous shroud of sorrow and forgiving promises.

“What song is this?” he asks.

Sapnap silently holds out his phone screen.

*Helium*, Dream reads.

His head tips up, eyes tracing over the grey interior and sunshades above. Blood rushes in his ears. He can feel his pulse fluttering on the slope of his neck.

“Sapnap,” he says.

“...Yeah?”

“You know I'm not over him.”

The sounds sway; the confession lingers. He stares at the ceiling.

Several beats of the song pass, before Sapnap murmurs, “I know.”

Dream's eyes shut. “I'm supposed to have let it go.” His voice falters, “That's what I promised. That's what I said.”

“Well...you've been trying—”

“I have,” Dream cuts in, weighted by his heavy breath.

“And working on stuff,” Sapnap continues. His voice is calm; patient. “You said the other day you felt more in control, right?”

“I don't know,” Dream mumbles quickly.

“What don't you know?”

His eyes snap open to meet with Sapnap's dark, concerned gaze. "I don't fucking know. I don't know what's happening to me right now. Everything came rushing back, and now—now I'm supposed to go see him? To *see* him? And then you're gonna leave, and he's going to be here, and I'm supposed to be—" *Whatever you want, I'll do it. I'll stick around. I won't do anything to make you uncomfortable.*

*Yours, I'm yours. I want to be yours.*

"How am I supposed to do this?" he asks softly.

"I thought," Sapnap says slowly, "you were feeling better?"

"I—" Dream starts, then clenches his jaw. "I am. I know I am."

Sapnap reaches over, and turns off the ignition. The twist of keys kills the hum of the car and last notes of music. "What...what would your guy say, if he was here instead of me?"

"My what?"

"Your therapist. The guy—I dunno," Sapnap says. "Lady-name. Laura." *Lauren.*

Dream takes the bundle of lanyard and keychain as it's dropped into his palm, and squeezes it. "He'd...he'd probably say it makes sense, that I'm having another one of these reactions." He turns the metal teeth over between his warm fingers. "That I could be self sabotaging, again."

"Are you?" Sapnap asks gently.

"No," Dream says, then exhales slowly. "Maybe. God, Sap." A wry, bittersweet grin cuts across his face. "How am I supposed to look at him and not just fall apart?"

Sapnap stares at him. His voice is hard. "You're friends first."

"What if I can't *be* a friend, first?"

"You can." Sapnap nudges Dream's head with a light shove, drawing his hand back as Dream pushes it away. "I get that today is a lot for us. I'm sure he's just as worried as you are," he says. "But when it comes down to it, you're a good guy. I know you know that. You're just scaring yourself right now."

Dream huffs. He passively runs his hands over the steering wheel.

The fear that tangles in his stomach with high, slanted excitement must be as confusing for Sapnap as it is for himself. He finds it difficult to expect anyone else to understand his tumultuous heart; often enough, he feels like he's the only person who's been down on their luck and forced to feel this way.

*He's right, he thinks. I know better.*

"I'm sorry," he says. "This is just...overwhelming. It's been a minute since I've felt like this." He hooks his thumbs into the bottom of the wheel, letting his palms hang. "It's funny how familiar it is."

His disheveled state now reminds him of his early days of healing, before the hurt began to subside. He wonders if it appears that way to Sapnap as well, who is undoubtedly studying him with caution.

“I was up so late last night,” he muses, “trying to avoid this.” He wants to laugh, but knows his passenger would disapprove. “It makes sense it’d come back to me now. Do you know how important sleep is, for stuff like this?”

“No,” Sapnap says.

Dream clears his throat. “It matters way more than you’d think. It’s better to consistently get, like, a couple of hours every night than fluctuate day to day. It took me a while to realize how my moods are all wrapped up in it.”

“Kinda bad that our schedules are a total mess, then,” Sapnap mutters.

“No kidding.” Dream huffs. “Like, I didn’t sleep well at all, and *now* we’re on the side of the goddamn road.” He catches the amusement that flickers across Sapnap’s face, and it warms him. “Oh, you liked that?”

Sapnap smiles lightly. “You suck.” He glances to the sidewalk next to them. “Come on. Who does this?”

Dream passes his eyes over the sunshine that glints off of car frames, and glares from his side mirrors. “Can we...can we switch?” He unbuckles himself with a light click. “I don’t want to be behind the wheel right now.”

Sapnap’s eyebrows raise. “Oh, sure.”

Knots of tension leave Dream’s body when he steps out of the car, careful to avoid passing traffic. The outside air immediately brings temperate heat against his skin. He draws in a breath, and can nearly taste water droplets on his tongue. Glancing back inside, he sees Sapnap awkwardly clambering over the center console.

He smiles.

Once he’s skirted around the burning hood and reseated himself in shotgun, a breath of relief escapes his lips.

“Better?” Sapnap asks.

Dream nods. “Not good for me to drive, when I feel like this. It’s way too dangerous.”

He tries to not linger too much on Sapnap’s unspoken surprise. They sit in comfortable silence for several minutes, only interrupted by the sound of adjustments changing on the driver’s chair.

Quietly, Dream says, “I’m terrified of screwing everything up.”

A pause passes that creeps into the frames of his recently cleaned windows, long enough to make him question if he’d truly said the words at all. Without the air conditioning on, heat begins to radiate from the dark dashboard.

When Sapnap speaks up, it startles him. “I think we all are,” he mutters, “when it comes to the people we care about.”

Dream turns his head to look at him, cheek brushing the fabric of the chair. Cautiously, he asks, “Have you ever screwed up?”

The wheel slides into its readjusted height. “I...take my time with things that are important to me,”

he answers.

Dream sighs. "So no."

"No," Sapnap says. "Not really."

He tosses the keys into Sapnap's lap. "When did you grow a pair?"

Sapnap rolls his eyes. "Whenever you lost yours, probably."

"Dickhead." Dream relaxes into the seat, wiping the grin from his face as he studies the side of his car he rarely sits in. "Do you think he knows that I...that I'm..." *A mess. An idiot. Still me.* He shifts visibly at the discomfort of avoiding the wrong words. "I'm not going to be completely different than who I was over the summer? That I'm still that person who sent the cringiest text of my life?"

Sapnap frowns. "I dunno." After a moment, he adds, "If he doesn't know that by now, then he has to learn eventually."

Dream's words fall soft, and tired. "What if it pushes him away again?"

Sapnap says nothing. A tense beat passes between them before he finally replies, "I don't know how to answer that."

"Sorry, that's alright, I just—" Dream exhales, raising the tips of his fingers to soothe the bridge of his nose at his oversharing. "That's perfectly okay. Thank you for—for everything. You're so patient with me, all the time, and...and it's helped more than you know to have you here." A smile ghosts by his lips. "I'm kind of glad, so far, that you booked the tickets wrong."

"Ah," Sapnap says, embarrassed. "Me too." He sounds vaguely guilty, still, whenever the mistake is talked about. He spent the better part of his first day in Florida apologizing profusely for it, with the soft-toned manner that Dream only hears when he knows he's speaking from the heart.

They sit in silence as it settles on them that this is all they have; all they're given. The road, and their combined anxiousness, and the inevitability of George, waiting at the airport for their arrival. They're not ready, but they have to be.

Dream sits up in the passenger chair. "Alright."

He slides his seatbelt into place.

"Alright?" Sapnap reaches for the ignition.

Dream looks at him, and says, "Please don't crash my car."

As the keys twist and the vehicle stutters back into life, their eyes collide with blue numbers on the digital clock.

In unison, they mutter, "Oh, fuck."

Dream's strangled breath pitches the words in his throat awkwardly, "We're *late*."

"We're fine." Sapnap quickly tugs on the gearshift, and glances over his shoulder.

"Oh my god." Dream hastily pulls out his phone, only to fumble it between the seat and center console when the car lurches back onto the road. "Dude!"

“Call George,” Sapnap orders.

Dream scowls, cramming his hand below the chair. “I’m *trying*.”

“Did you seriously drop your phone?”

His fingertips skim the sleek device nestled on the car floor, before he’s able to tug it back into his grasp. “You’re driving like an idiot.”

“Tell me where to go.” Sapnap recklessly merges into a less crowded lane, forcing Dream to wince. “I’m just winging it, here.”

Dream waves flippantly at the road ahead of them. “Keep going that way.”

He feels Sapnap begin to seethe. Again, he says, “*Call* him.”

The nerves in Dream’s chest gather in a suffocating bundle, as he clumsily opens George’s contact. The numbers on the stereo and speedometer mock him silently.

He hesitates.

“Dream!” Sapnap shouts.

He presses the call icon. As it rings, he switches the audio to speakerphone.

George picks up within seconds.

Immediately, Dream begins to ramble, “George, hey, I’m *so* sorry I know you’re probably wondering where we are, but we’re running late and—”

“Oh no!” George says brightly. “Late for what?”

The warmth in his tone causes Dream’s words to abruptly halt, and die on his tongue. In only an instance of hearing George’s voice, he can feel the air in his lungs again. The drumming in his ribcage slows.

“Oh,” he says. “Well, we’re...getting someone from the airport right now.”

Dream can make out slight chatter in the background as George asks, “Are you?”

The corners of his mouth twitch at the playful twinge in George’s voice. “Yeah. His flight landed already, and we were supposed to be there at eleven.”

“That’s funny,” George says, “because I was just on a plane.”

“Oh really?” Dream smiles. “No wonder you sound like that.”

“Like what?”

His amusement grows. “Like you were just on a plane.”

George hums, and the phone static frays the vibrating edges. “You know my voice that well?”

“I think I do,” Dream says.

Sapnap smacks his shoulder sharply, before returning his hand to the wheel. “Fucking *tell* him what’s going on.”

“Right, right, sorry.” Dream rubs his arm as he straightens up in his seat. “We ran into some trouble for a bit, but we’re almost there and should be pulling up soon. Which baggage claim are you near?” He pauses. “Again, I’m really sorry.”

“It’s alright, I promise. I’m still waiting for my luggage,” George explains. “I think I can see a sign outside the windows that says ‘B.’”

“Gotcha.” Dream tilts the phone in his palm away from his mouth, and points to green road signs ahead. “So that’s the opposite side of where I got you. Do you see that up there? Go to the right.”

“There’s like three lanes, dude,” Sapnap says. “Which one?”

“The middle one.” Dream shifts back into the call. “Sorry. Sapnap is driving.”

Audibly stunned, George questions, “Why?”

“Getting ready to run you over,” Sapnap projects louder than necessary for the speaker to catch.

“Oh god,” says George’s tinny voice, causing them both to grin. “What does your car look like, though? I’ll keep an eye out for it.”

Sapnap leans towards Dream’s phone. “It’s stupid and green.”

“Dark green,” Dream corrects. “Wait, you’re not gonna be able to—okay. I’ll send you a picture.”

Light clicks and arrows appear on the car’s dashboard as Dream scrolls through his camera roll.

He frowns. “Why are you signaling? Don’t go that way, go straight.”

Sapnap stubbornly readjusts the controls near the steering wheel. “These roads are *confusing*, Dream.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re acting like you just got your license,” Dream says.

“Fuck off.”

He sends the first picture of his car’s boxy exterior he can find into their text thread, and George’s light laughter floats through the phone.

“Did you get the photo?” he asks. It’s several days old, from when Dream’s mother had asked if the frame needed a cleaning, in relation to a coupon she’d saved for a local car-wash. Dream had responded with the quick image of Sapnap, face pinched in defense under the bright sun, spraying the hood with a hose.

“I did,” George says. “Thank you. Nice crocs, Sapnap.”

“Those weren’t mine,” Sapnap defends hurriedly. “Dream owns way more pairs than you’d think.”

“No way.”

“Yes way,” Dream mutters.

Sapnap grins at his clear humiliation. “They’re even bigger in person. Clown shoes.”

“Can’t wait to see them, then,” George says, and the finality causes a shift to occur in the air of their call.

Beneath sunny blue, the airport appears in the broad capture of Dream's windshield. Planes pass overhead; excitement bubbles between them.

"George," Dream says, "George. How was your flight?"

"Dream," George replies, "my flight was good."

He can't help the smile that warms on his face. "George, how was the—"

"Can you stop that and give me directions?" Sapnap interrupts.

Dream tosses him an annoyed glance, but relents. "Do you see his airline up there? That should be close enough." As Sapnap draws near, Dream scans the crowded sidewalk. "Are you outside?"

They park parallel to the curb of the carpool lane. An elderly man passes by wearing a red, white, and blue tank that is saturated with unappealing sweat stains. Dream winces, and snaps his attention away to the trunk of the car in front of them. He *hates* Labor day weekend rush. He and Sapnap had made a point to do entirely un-patriotic activities for the past few days, minus attending the barbecue where his siblings annihilated them in a hot-dog eating contest.

"Almost," George says. "I still don't have my bags. I swear it's taking longer than customs did."

"I didn't have to go through customs," Sapnap inputs with a hint of vanity.

George huffs. "I should've tried to bring one of my knives. Just for you."

"And get arrested?" Dream questions. His eyes flit over the people passing on the sidewalk, and the glass entrance to the terminal that he catches glimpses of between bags and shoulders.

"Worth it," George says, then his voice pitches, "Oh wait! I think I see my stuff."

"Awesome, well we're—" Drivers press angrily on their horns around them, the busy airport collecting noisily beyond Dream's car doors. "Jesus, people are pissy today."

"Why is that lady flipping me off?" Sapnap mumbles softly.

Dream tosses a similar gesture back with ease. "They're real sticklers about keeping this lane moving. They don't like when people park for this long."

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, I'm almost—" George begins, but Dream quickly stops him.

"Don't be. Stuff just tends to move too fast, here." He retracts his seatbelt from where it crosses over his chest, without pausing to think. "Sap, I'm gonna get out and find him. Can you take the car around?"

"I don't know where the fuck 'around' is," Sapnap says.

Dream is already halfway out the door. "It's easy, you can follow the signs."

"What signs?"

Dream points. "Right there, oh my god, it'll just be a few minutes. Follow the loop and go."

He slams the door shut and watches through narrowed eyes the temerity with which Sapnap tears away. He prays his car returns in one piece.

He switches his phone off of speaker mode and draws it to his ear. “Sorry about that, George. Where did you say you were?”

He glances at the blue and white signs hanging above him, head swiveling to scan the crowd of busy bodies and airport musk.

“George?” he repeats.

“Sorry, sorry,” George says. “I just got my bags. Where are you?”

Dream pushes past strangers, making his way towards the large glass doors that slide open before travelers. A grin lifts on his face as realization sets in.

“I’m nearby,” he utters vaguely.

He hears George scoff. “Oh, god. You’re not seriously going to do that thing, are you?”

“What thing?” Dream feigns.

“Don’t be dumb. You want to see me first, and then like, giving me a heart attack or something,” George says. The playful scenario Dream has joked about one too many times weighs with irritation on his tone. He’s been repeating it for years; it’s only fair to live up to George’s expectations.

“I bet,” Dream muses, “I can find you, before you find me.”

“That’s not fair,” George says flatly. “You have an advantage.”

His heart races as his eyes dance over the tops of heads in the crowd. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A beat of silence passes. “I could just yell your name and see who looks at me,” George considers.

The automated doors glide open as he steps inside, squinting at the bright fluorescents. Cool billows of an air-conditioned breeze race to greet his frontside, only to be lost in the immediate humidity outdoors.

“Do it, then,” Dream says. Hoards of strangers spread sparse across the tile floor, moseying by dormant carousels, tugging their bags to and fro. He’s always liked airports; a unique collection of people and converging lives, they seem to be full of possibility.

“Nevermind,” George mumbles through the phone. “That would be really weird.”

Dream grins. Hovering near the door and ignoring people that nudge his shoulders as they slip by, he says, “I knew you wouldn’t have the balls to do it.”

“Says the guy who is *hiding* from me right now.” The background noise on George’s end is suddenly accompanied with the occasional honk, and rush of a nearby car.

*When did George go outside?* His brows pinch together as his eyes pass over the terminal. *I came in through the only exit.*

“I’m not hiding,” Dream starts defensively, turning to leave the baggage claim again, “I’m—”

The glass doors part before him noiselessly. His heart drops into his stomach.

“Dream?” George questions. “Hello? What—did the call fail?” Dream sees him pull his phone from his ear, to glance at the screen, then return it to his face. “Why’d you...” His voice tapers off as his eyes rapidly search their surroundings.

Immersed in the crowd of busy bodies, rushing strangers, squeaking luggage wheels—George stands wrapped in confusion. Dream’s mind snags onto pieces of him; dark sweats, an off-purple shirt, rolled up sleeves to expose the pale skin of his forearms. His knuckles are curled around his off-blue luggage. A grey neck pillow hangs lazily from his bag.

Dream can see his furrowed gaze search the crowd, and see his chest shift when he breathes.

He’s real. He’s here.

“You,” Dream’s words escape him in a battered breath, “walked *past* me.”

When he’d stood in the terminal entrance, his gaze slipped through him like a ghost, and George glided out onto the sidewalk with nothing more than a slight bump of elbows.

*We passed each other. We missed each other.*

George turns, and turns, face pinched in sharp thought and confusion. Faces interrupt and swarm the sidewalk between them, and Dream loses him in a sea of blurred color. He blinks, eyes flitting through the bustle, nearly swearing he’d imagined the faraway silhouette as strangers block his vision—until he sees George again.

Still lost; still waiting.

*He’s here.*

A smile spreads across Dream’s face as happiness, immeasurable happiness, swells in his lion-heart.

He pockets his phone, and yells, “George!”

He watches the way George’s head snaps to look at him, surprise leaping across his face when the realization collides amid the sea of madness.

Dream waves dramatically, pushing past strangers whose eyes cut to him with irritation. The wide swings of his arm are threatening to heads at elbow-height, but care escapes him as George raises a slow hand in return.

The expression spread across George’s features, curious and disbelieving, blooms the closer Dream gets. His fingers slide carelessly away from his luggage, as he steps forward to defeat the distance halfway, moving like a floating bird in search of an anchor.

Dream is laughing when he finally reaches him. George is *beaming* when he finally reaches him.

The second Dream meets his gaze from arms-length away, colors in his world saturate with impossible warmth. Blobs of passing strangers dance in the edges of his vision like refracted sunbeams. George’s eyes are rich, dark, and bold like the rest of him.

Yet his smile is soft.

“Hi,” Dream says, as his chest rises and falls rapidly.

George’s smile grows. He breathes, “Hi.”

Loosed by unthinking joy, Dream closes the distance and tugs George into a tight embrace. His frame engulfs him, melding them together as George instantly returns the clasp around his middle with gripping excitement.

He feels George's face press into his chest, his brown hair barely brushing on the dip of collarbones. Dream's forearms are locked around his small back, trembling. His cheek lowers down to press against George's head.

"Oh my god," George muffles into Dream's shirt. The warmth of his breath soaks into the cotton.

Dream's arm's squeeze around him. "Oh my god."

George's fingers dig into his back. "Oh my god."

Dream chuckles, biting back the urge to repeat it again. Shaky tears spring into the corners of his vision.

"Dream," George says, his voice breaking.

Dream's heart pounds, the rhythm emanating from deep in his core. Close in his arms, tight to his chest, George breathes into him.

His eyes flutter shut. *This is too good to be dreaming.*

"I..." Dream feels his tongue slipping nervously, "I feel like I haven't seen you all summer."

George laughs. He *laughs*. Dream feels it rattle through the thin frame pinned to his chest, and jostle his forearms against George's back. The addictive sound winds itself into Dream's throat as giddy giggles begin to escape him.

George's hands grow lax and slip from his shoulder blades. Dream pulls back, their touch severing completely as his palms slide into his jeans.

"Um, how—how was your—" he tries, smiling and stuttering as George laughs at him again. Amusement leaves his lungs in sporadic bursts.

George's eyes openly rake across his face, dappled with light as he dawns a studious expression. Before Dream can recover from the feel of his skin under George's gaze, he's pulled forward again.

George's arms wrap tight around his waist, bones cutting into his t-shirt. The unexpected hug startles Dream, and his hands float in suspended caution until they slowly return to wrap around his low shoulders. Warmth filters between every inch of touch they share.

He's sure George can hear the racing of his heart as he splays a palm to the back of his dark hair.

"How was your flight?" he manages to ask, chin bumping George's head.

His hand shifts over the soft strands as George pulls back slightly. His eyes tip up at Dream.

"You already asked me that," he says.

Dream notes how George hadn't parted as far back as he'd done before. He glances rapidly across George's face, freckles, and slope of his cheekbones. This close, he can nearly place the aroma of his shampoo in the tangle of humid air.

“Did I?” he murmurs, hand lingering on the back of George’s head. “Well, maybe your answer changed in the past five minutes.”

George’s mouth parts to respond, but he hesitates and draws his brows together with a guarded expression. The thick breeze and airport noise seem to rush them at once.

Dream separates from him immediately. Enough space is placed between them to balance their clipped breathing, and ease the sharp nerves that had suddenly collided. When George’s shoulders lose their tense stature, he knows the movement was the right idea.

“I can never sleep on planes,” George answers finally.

Dream’s eyebrows raise. “I thought you could fall asleep anywhere.”

George huffs lightly. “Definitely not on a flight to come see you guys.” He moves back to re-grasp his forgotten luggage on the sidewalk.

“Or with your over-cologned seat mate,” Dream tries, smiling at the way George’s cheeks lift because of it. “How was *that* after nine hours?”

His words are trembling at the edges, he knows, the excitement and surrealism slipping from every syllable. They’ve hardly talked over the phone in weeks, and now it’s *in person* and completely *terrifying*. His pulse stutters as George’s gaze flicks up to meet his own again.

“Awful,” George says brightly.

“Well.” Dream can’t tear his eyes away. “I hope it was worth it.”

George smiles. “We’ll see about that.”

Dream’s mind is left in fuzzy wandering after their last hug, and he refrains from pulling him in again. He blinks, and George is still standing before him, undoubtedly tired but radiant in every sense of the word.

“It is really, really good to see you,” Dream confesses. He’d feel rude for staring if George wasn’t doing the same.

“Yeah,” George says, “*you too.*”

Dream’s cheeks warm as he remembers, faintly, George is seeing his full face for the first time after years of calls, texts, half-assed photos and endless bickering. “Right.”

“Right,” George echoes, grinning. “Are you being shy?”

“How am I—fuck off.” He nudges George’s shin lightly with the tip of his shoe. “You’re the one who *passed* me. You walked right by, like you didn’t even know who I was.”

“I didn’t pass you,” George defends sharply, “*you passed me.* You’re the one who should’ve seen me first.”

“Okay, maybe, *maybe*—but it was hard for me to recognize the top of your head,” Dream says, because it’s true. George is entirely below his eye level.

George’s grin is wiped from his face. “You can’t see the top of my head.”

“Yes I can,” Dream gloats. “Sapnap might be able to, too.”

George's knuckles shove his shoulder. "Don't joke about that, oh my god."

He laughs, hand raising to gently cover the place where George's fingers had been. "It's the inevitable, George. He's gonna be here any minute now." He watches what seems like confusion knit across George's face. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing," George dismisses.

Dream's pulse quickens. "Did I say something?"

"It's nothing." George tugs his suitcase in front of his feet, and briefly glances to the road. "I just haven't heard you say my name in person, like this."

He smiles bashfully. "George," he says.

George's eyes snap back to him. "It's *weird*," he breathes, but the corners of his mouth twitch upward. "This is weird."

"It *is* weird," Dream agrees. He extends his hand, and George lets him take the bags from his grip as they move towards the curb.

"I'm going to say this now," George says, regarding Dream's face with caution. "This is gonna take some time to get used to."

Dream laughs. "Don't worry," he soothes, playful until his voice softens involuntarily, "we have all the time in the world."

George smiles in gentle surprise. When he looks as though he's about to respond, an aggressive flurry of honking interrupts them.

The sound smothers the beeping and chatter that had faded from Dream's attention during their conversation, and the familiarity of the putrid noise makes his grin return. He's sat in enough hours of bullet-sweating traffic to know his own horn by heart.

"I think," George says as Dream turns to look at the carpool lane, "I see your car."

Windows down, music pounding from the shoddy speakers, Sapnap slams his palm into the steering wheel repeatedly as he slides into an opening. His hand disappears below Dream's line of sight presumably to the gear shift, as he aggressively locks the wheels in place.

He spills out of the car, and hastily tugs up his sunglasses to yell, "Georgie!"

Dream lifts George's suitcase, and steps back as Sapnap comes rushing towards them. George glances at him in the microseconds before he's attacked in an overwhelming bear hug, and the brief flash of surprise in his eyes stores itself in Dream's memory immediately.

Such a small act of communication that he'd caught, that he'd recognized. His smile lifts with the bottom of George's shoes as Sapnap heaves them from the ground. George's constricted hand pats Sapnap's back until he's set down.

"*I found* you," Sapnap chokes out as he steps back. "Dude. *Dude*. How the fuck are you doing? How was the flight? Did you read that thing I sent you—"

They dive into rapid greetings that are wired with loving excitement. Dream observes their meeting with an amused smile, relishing every look that skitters his way when George's eyes slide off of

Sapnap.

It feels like a beginning; it feels like a secret.

“Dream,” Sapnap says, breathless from his rambling, “come on.” His arm is slung with ease around George’s shoulders, until George reaches to nudge it off. “Who is taller?”

They stare at Dream expectantly. He shifts George’s luggage in his hands.

“I...” He glances between them, biting the inside of his cheek. “I don’t think I should answer that.”

Sapnap clutches the car’s lanyard in his hands. “*Dream.*”

He leans forward to rip the keys from his grip. “We really should head out, I don’t wanna get yelled at.”

Sapnap complains instantly.

Dream tosses a quick look at George, paired with a slight smirk, and his heart skips when George rolls his eyes. Wordless, and effortless, their secret grows.

His face is warm when he slings George’s luggage into the trunk. The bags are accompanied by a small tag, scribbled with George’s name and number in neat handwriting. Dream studies it for a moment, lingering on the scrawl with a smile.

He feels the frame shudder as the others slam the passenger doors shut. His fingers stall, curved over the warm paint of the compartment’s opening. The light sting against his skin pushes him to let out a deep breath.

*I can do this.*

He closes the trunk, and hurries to the driver’s seat.

“—While *you* on the other hand probably fit perfectly in those narrow rows—” Sapnap is saying from shotgun as Dream clammers behind the wheel.

“That’s not what I said,” George defends. “You aren’t some kind of giant—”

“Come on, man. Don’t even try—”

“Sapnap,” Dream says, “he *just* got here. Let him breathe.” He quickly revs the engine back into life, checking the lights on the dashboard before turning around in his seat. He smiles. “Hi, George.”

“Hello,” George echoes with amusement.

“Hi,” Sapnap says, “you *shortstack*—“

Dream rolls his eyes. “Welcome to Florida.”

George glances momentarily at the hand Dream has hooked on the shoulder of the driver’s seat, before it returns to the wheel. “Thanks for having me. Pleasure to be here.”

“Expect to see all of the greatest tourist destinations on your visit,” Dream says warmly, fingers gliding over the wheel as he begins to pull away from the curb.

“Dream’s weird fridge,” Sapnap contributes solemnly. He pivots towards George. “It *talks*.”

“Sapnap’s fat ass,” Dream counters.

“Right,” George says. “I’ve already seen one of those things.”

“His massive backyard. So much grass.”

“Oh, that one was actually kind of nice,” Dream notes. “Thank you.” He waves with sickening sweetness to a nearby foot-traffic worker who seems displeased at their slowness.

Sapnap hums, continuing, “Patches’ litter box.”

“...Aw?” George questions. “Do you spend a lot of time looking at that, Sapnap?”

Dream laughs shortly. As they exit the airport lanes, warm air slips through the unrolled windows and brushes over the blonde hair on his arms. Sunlight skips across his dash.

“You’ll see some rainbows if it storms,” Sapnap says. “So colorful, y’know? Oh *wait*.” Dream doesn’t need to look to know his grin is sharp.

“Are we,” Dream interrupts, before they can get lost in an insult-war, “in the mood to stop somewhere?”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I could eat,” George pipes from the backseat. “My flight only had aubergine lasagna.”

Dream smothers a sharp huff. Years ago, George told him how he’d been forced to eat an eggplant dish his ‘chef’ of a sister poorly crafted, and was riddled with food poisoning for days. Ever since, he’s despised it.

“Ah,” Sapnap drawls, “*eggplants*.”

“Sapnap, please.” George’s complaint is laced with a smile. “The *pact*.”

Dream frowns for a moment, then amused recognition spreads across his face. “Jesus, I totally forgot about that.”

Somewhere in the confusing muddle of summer, they’d created a pact to not bother George, which was solidified with ‘verbal signatures.’

Despite hardly ever referring to food when on the topic of George’s hatred for the purple fruit, Sapnap mutters, “I didn’t think vegetable jokes would count as breaking it.”

“Not a vegetable,” Dream and George say in repetitive unison.

Dream has to bite back a grin. “You didn’t answer me, though. Food?”

“Hm. I’d probably get something to go,” Sapnap offers.

Dream nods. “Alright, then.” He skims the nearby road signs, navigating back to the freeway. “Pick a letter, George.”

Sapnap pulls out his phone, and reaches for the charging cord.

George says, “What?”

“Just pick a letter,” Sapnap repeats.

“Um.” George hesitates. “Z?”

“Bold choice,” Dream says as Sapnap tisks. “Sapnap, please list all our options of restaurants that start with ‘Z’ on the route home.”

Sapnap begins to type away. “On it.”

He hears George laugh lightly, and as a various string of food-stop names rises over the low music, Dream’s attention breaks from the road.

He lifts his gaze from concrete and green to see George, in the rearview mirror, seated in the backseat of his car as if he’s always been there. His head is turned to the side, flickering eyes dark against the light grey of the seat cushions, contentment settled across his face.

Dream thinks of the countless hours he’s spent driving and wishing he could witness this very moment; George turning away from the window to look forward, and his eyes leaping to meet Dream’s in the reflection.

Warmth blooms in his chest. Dream smiles.

George’s calm features break into a friendly grin, and he raises a hand to give a half-wave.

Their eyes separate, and they collectively begin to discuss the ethics of getting breakfast food past twelve o’clock in the afternoon. As green exit signs slide by overhead, and yellow dashes race under the car’s tires, Dream knows he’s not concentrating on the road, anymore.

He glances at George in the mirror again.

*Not at all.*

#### Chapter End Notes

it has been a long time comin', but this chapter is finally here! tha boys are all together, and so it begins :) I really did enjoy writing this one, tried to stick to realism with a bit of playfulness since meeting an online friend for the first time is a super unique experience. I uploaded this a lot quicker than I thought I would, but again, 1-2 weeks is what I'm hoping to aim for! thank you for all the love on the first upload, it has been very chill and nice to see you again <3

I appreciate the support so much, and once again would like to ask that you keep discussions of this work w/in the community. happy reading :)

## Doorways

### Chapter Summary

With nerves running high, Dream and Sapnap make an effort to entertain their new guest.

### Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter that I highly considered cutting down, but didn't have the heart to leave anything out. I felt that if any one should be so detailed, it deserves to be this one :) Bear with me, and enjoy!

—

Please, do NOT mention this work in CC's streams, donations, chats, or comment sections. This extends beyond those mentioned in the fic, and to CC's of any kind, including the musicians/band. Though this work falls safely under boundaries that have been publicly stated, I do not in any way encourage the conversation of this material anywhere that could bring discomfort to other groups.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They settled on a low-ceilinged hoagie restaurant, small enough to not threaten them with being recognized, but large enough for Dream to easily stretch out in the warm booth. Their post-airport lunch is light and leisurely; warm foods, trivial chatter, recounting of inside jokes to blanket traces of subtle unease.

Certain pauses in conversation carry a half-given beat of awkwardness, of clumsiness, as they collectively learn how to exist in the same space together. Sapnap falls silent when soft chuckles die down, and Dream can tell he's nervous. George idly rearranges the napkin and utensils before him, and Dream guesses that means he's nervous, too.

A lot could weigh on this, they know. Yet with the way that George smiles when Sapnap teases Dream, or how they begin what could be a week-long fight over who has the rights to his car's passenger seat, Dream feels they'll fall into comfort in no time.

Maroon leather slides against his back as he reclines in his seat, dragging a napkin over his mouth. George picks at his fries from across the table. Despite 'not being hungry yet,' Sapnap snags a few stray seasoned wedges, his elbows nudging Dream on the retrieval.

"I'd say this meal is pretty American," George says.

"They are greasy," Dream agrees, staring down at the half-eaten lump of bread and meat on his plate. "Still good, though. Are there any foods here that you've thought about wanting to try?"

George shrugs.

“We could go to that one Mexi place,” Sapnap says.

Dream tips his head at him in confusion, until Sapnap vaguely gestures with his hands a large, burrito shape. “Oh.”

George’s dark eyes lift from his meal to meet Dream’s gaze. “Up to our host.”

He smiles. “Up to our guest.”

“Don’t lie,” George says, “I know you have some kind of itinerary. I can feel it.”

“True,” Sapnap inputs before Dream can argue against it.

“Not an *itinerary*.” He leans forward, and spitefully steals fries from George’s basket. “It’s just like, a list we jotted down of stuff to do while you’re here. If you want to, I mean. They’re just suggestions.”

George’s eyebrows raise. “A list?”

Instead of only hearing the warm amusement lying beneath the surface of George’s voice, Dream witnesses it happen. The way it shines in his eyes; curls his taut mouth together.

“A list,” Dream repeats in confirmation. He nervously chews the fries, and raises a palm over his mouth as he muffles, “It’s probably in Sapnap’s room, somewhere.”

George grins. “It’s *handwritten*?”

“I dunno why you sound so surprised,” Sapnap says. “Dream makes ‘em all the time.”

“I did not know that.” George looks at him, head tilting in an unspoken question.

“It’s a good way to pass the time,” Dream answers. Hesitation trickles into the soft syllables of his reply, and he smooths his thumb over the folded creases he’s made on the napkin in his lap.

George smiles, quizzically. “Why handwritten, though? I use my notes app for everything.”

Dream glances at him. Tracing graphite over soft lines on paper gives his world order, and traps his words in safety. What he chooses to sink into the ringed notepad of his groceries or pages of his journal is controlled; secluded.

In short, ‘accidents’ are harder to send.

“Writing stuff down helps me organize my thoughts a bit more,” he says, keeping his tone even to not bait anymore interrogation. When he sees that George seems satisfied with his explanation, he looks away.

“I like the lists,” Sapnap says. “They’re cute.” He turns to nudge up the bottom hem of Dream’s shirt, fingers jabbing into his lower back.

Dream leans forward slightly in confusion. “What are you—”

His leather wallet slides from the back pocket of his jeans, and is flopped heavily onto the table next to napkins and sugar packets. He rolls his eyes.

Dream told him where he stored the small notes in confidence, and *knew* he was only waiting for the perfect moment to rifle through them. As he watches Sapnap flip open the wallet, and extract

several folded pieces of paper stashed between credit cards and coupons—he feels inklings of regret for telling him at all.

Sapnap passes one to George, who takes it gingerly.

“You,” Dream says to them both as Sapnap opens one, “are so annoying.”

“It’s *funny*,” Sapnap coos, then clears his throat. “This list is called, ‘Yellow.’”

“Of course you keep them in your wallet,” George mutters.

Dream feels his face warm at his tone. It’s a sound that borders on fondness from a summer past, but he quickly forgets to respond when Sapnap speaks.

“Pencil, school bus,” Sapnap reads from the white paper in his hands, “fire hydrant. Buggy at house across the street.” He looks up. “Dream, is this just a—”

“List of yellow stuff I saw one week,” Dream concludes, defensive.

George laughs. “*Why?*”

“Lemons. Lemonade. School bus, again,” Sapnap continues. “Envelope. Another bus. Sun—the sun, dude?”

“Yellow is a nice color,” Dream answers weakly. They’re only mindless lists he makes to anchor down his racing thoughts. He knows they don’t mean much; he *could* toss them in the trash without a care once completed. Yet as he watches George carefully unfold brittle paper, he can’t help but wonder if there could be one in the stacked pile that he *doesn’t* want them to see.

“Why are there so many?” George asks. He peers down at the page in hand. “This says, ‘Susnap.’”

Sapnap frowns, refolding the list of yellows. “What? What’s it say?”

Dream feels himself grin with recollection. “Ah.”

“Pink hoodie,” George reads, “orange juice. Phone charger, and then in parenthesis, ‘broken’ with a question mark. Nail polish, bubblegum—”

“*Dream*,” Sapnap says sharply, leaning forward to yank the paper from George’s grasp. He balls it up in his palm, while Dream chuckles at him lightly.

“I don’t get it.”

“Me neither, George.” Dream begins to slip a few lists back into his wallet. “I don’t remember what that one was about.”

Sapnap shoves his heel into Dream’s shin below the table. The smile on his face is unflinching, and he’s glad his initial embarrassment turned into this.

“Bread,” Sapnap says as he opens another. “Butter. Fried egg, salami, mayo *and* mustard—okay. The rest of this is boring. You’re boring.”

Dream rolls his eyes. He remembers that one; he’d been trapped in a heated ‘Geoguessr’ call with Wilbur and a few friends, irritated that he somehow guessed *Italy* wrong, and starving for a breakfast he’d neglected to make beforehand. Seething, he’d scribbled down the ingredients, until his anger was reduced to hunger pains only.

His gaze snags on a dog-eared list now resting atop the pile, worn and blue ink seeping fuzzied shapes from the inside. His eyes widen with recollection as George reaches for it.

*Not that one.*

“I think,” he says, quickly grabbing it before either of his friends can, “that’s enough, for now. You’ve made your point.”

George notices his haste. He peers at Dream curiously, but says nothing, as Sapnap deviates from the wallet and ropes them into another conversation. The weighty shade of his eyes carries a slight glint from the fluorescents overhead.

*It’ll take time to get used to*, he’d muttered when surrounded by the airport hum.

Dream hasn’t agreed with anything more in his life. Throughout the duration of their drive and bickering over parking and assessment of tables and menus, seeing George has been surreal. Webcams and digital selfies are nothing compared to what lays before him now. Some moments feel like he’s always only known George in person, and others as though he’s meeting him for the first time.

He longs to have answers that wouldn’t be right to ask for over greasy buns and fizzing soda cups. Answers for questions like; *Did you miss me? Are you surprised? Do I look like you thought I would?*

“Why do you keep staring at me?” Dream asks, and his jaw clenches once he realizes what’s left his lips.

*You idiot*, he thinks, and George quickly looks away, *you giant idiot*.

“Sorry,” George voices in an embarrassed hush, and Dream has to keep himself from wincing.

“Does he look like you thought he would?” Sapnap questions, and Dream’s eyes slide sharply to see him innocently sipping from his glass.

*Why would he ask*—“Sapnap, don’t make him—”

“Sort of,” George chimes, and Dream is rushed into silence.

He nervously glances back to see George looking at him, *studying* him, with the same expression he had standing on the terminal sidewalk. His attention lifts to Dream’s eyes.

“I think I underestimated you,” George says, and it sounds like the words are for him, only.

His chest tightens. “That’s a bad habit of yours.”

George blinks, but his gaze is unflinching. “I know,” he says.

Dream’s eyebrows raise. “You know?”

“Can you pass the ketchup?” Sapnap asks.

Dream’s heart pounds, George’s eyes slip away, and he blindly passes the red, glassy bottle to his right.

“Okay, George,” Dream says, shutting his car door once they’ve returned to his neighborhood. He exhales shortly. “This is my—”

“No way,” George interrupts, as he slides out of the backseat. “You’re joking.”

Standing at the foot of his concrete driveway, the three peer up at Dream’s house. Clouds pass sparse on the blue sky behind the roof. Palm trees in his yard sway idly.

He side-eyes the white arches and dark shingles he’s become indifferent towards. “I am not joking.”

Sapnap heaves George’s suitcase in his hands. “Tell me I was wrong. I dare you.”

“Wrong about what?” Dream steps forward, forcing George to stir to life next to him, and follow.

“You were right,” George says.

He regards them with narrowed eyes. “Right about *what*? ”

“That it looks like a middle aged mom would live here,” Sapnap gives in, tossing Dream a sharp smile. George nods as though the observation should’ve been clear immediately.

“Well, I mean—” Dream tries, yet stops short in his own defense. Slight embarrassment squeezes in his chest as they make their way to his front door.

“Please, Dream,” George says, and although Dream doesn’t need to look to see his grin, he does anyway. His eyes are bright and the amusement folds across his face with grace. “Continue.”

“I guess you’re not wrong,” he carries on slowly, “since almost all of my neighbors are in their forties—”

“Oh my god,” George says. “You really *do* live in suburbia.”

Dream rolls his eyes. “You live on the same property as your *mother*, George.”

“Shit.” Sapnap’s laugh earns a glare of betrayal. “Sorry, man, that’s a K.O.”

George shakes his head in slight disapproval as Dream turns back to the door.

“My plan is to do it all backwards,” Dream says. He slides his key into the lock. “Big ol’ family house now, and then move to a city apartment when I’m like, sixty-five and having pains using the stairs.”

Sapnap pushes on the door once the metal clicks open. “Move to Houston.”

Dream steps to the side as he holds the entrance for them. “No.”

Arm stretched through the threshold, his palm presses flat against the wood. Sapnap tugs George’s luggage inside, narrowly avoiding Dream’s knees as the bag sways intentionally in his grip.

His attention falls on George, who’s feet are on his doormat, head under the overhang, hands within reaching distance—and eyes fixed on Dream.

A silent breath catches in his throat. “Um,” he says. “Welcome, George.”

“I’m gonna dump this upstairs,” Sapnap says, dragging the suitcase away.

When George moves inside, his steps are hesitant, eyes rapidly leaping from wall to wall. “I can’t believe I’m actually...here,” he says.

Dream’s gaze slips over the back of his dark hair; his thin shoulders in the tinted-purple crewneck. The height of the ceiling in the foyer doubles when George moves deeper beneath it.

*Me neither*, Dream wants to say. He glides the door shut behind them.

“Well,” he mutters, and George turns back to face him, “you better believe it.”

His eyes fall to George’s smile as it lifts across his pale features. It’s a brief, impulsive flicker that sends his heart into the stratosphere the moment he realizes what he’s doing.

He clears his throat. “So, I could just show you where you’re sleeping, or...we could take a look around, if you want.”

“Are you offering me a tour?”

Dream grins. “Yes.”

George laughs gently. “Then yes,” he says.

When Dream steps past him to dramatically place himself in the center of the opening hall, he notices how George’s attention fails to wander anywhere but his face. He spreads his arms wide, palms up.

“Let’s begin,” he utters. George’s eyes squeeze with amusement at his ridiculousness, so he clears his throat for emphasis. “I have to ask that you refrain from touching anything we come across in our tour. I know you’ll be tempted to—” George scoffs, and Dream can hardly talk through his smile. “But everything here is very fragile. And worth millions.”

“Even the ‘welcome to Gatorville sign?’” George asks, pointing firmly to the tacky green and orange sign Dream had grabbed from a thrift store several years back.

“Millions,” he repeats. He turns to step down the hall. “And no flash photography, please.”

“Okay,” George says, pulling out his phone, and clicking his camera shutter at the ‘expensive’ decoration.

Dream stops abruptly when he sees the flash ricochet across the glossy walls. He stares at George with a wavering expression of feigned disapproval.

The look is returned to Dream, dark brown and defiant.

Very slowly, George turns the phone tilted up in his palm threateningly towards Dream, whose face breaks into a smile immediately.

“You’re such an idiot,” he says in a rush, defeated as he quickly turns to avoid George’s hypothetical photo.

“Camera shy.”

“Whatever.” He cranes his neck towards the direction of the stairs, and cups his hands over his mouth. “Sapnap!”

After a few seconds, they hear Sapnap yell back, “What?”

“We’re giving George a tour!” Dream shouts.

A series of intentionally heavy footsteps ensue. After only a week, Dream can distinguish with ease when Sapnap leaps lightly from the stairs, and collides with the hardwood landing.

“I was looking for the kitty-cat,” he says, once rejoined with them in the hall. Patches and Dream are one in the same; they love Sapnap, but aren’t fond of his noisy feet.

“I’m sure she’s around here somewhere.” Dream glances at George. “She’s a little skittish, at first.”

*Like you.*

“Don’t take it personally,” Sapnap says in agreement. “She didn’t let me hold her till like, my third day.”

George makes a comment about what ‘holding’ means to a guy who gave him such a life-threatening hug at the airport. Sapnap responds with something Dream asks him not to repeat, to no avail, and he’s forced to let them bicker.

The tour marches on through the kitchen and living room. Sapnap dutifully agrees to help Dream as a ‘guide,’ and they spend most of their time entertaining George with lame jokes and talking over each other’s words. Sapnap demonstrates the talking fridge; George makes comments on the cabinets, and couches. When George glides his fingertips over the cool countertops, the tension seems to be leaving his shoulders and slipping from his face. Abundant smiles and quips lift from his mouth.

Dream keeps himself focused, gesturing to vague pieces of furniture and trying whatever he can to hear George’s laugh echo off his walls. His heart thumps in a relentless, rapid pace against his ribs at the sight of George *here*, in his house, stepping over cushions and touching the screen door that he’d imagined he would hundreds of times. He’d certainly never imagined George would be this polite; noting the cleanliness, and dropping light compliments.

When they reach the backyard and stand on the concrete patio, a much needed breath of fresh air washes over them all. Sapnap, barefoot, points at plants and makes up useless facts as they wander about Dream’s ‘garden.’

Hands in his pockets, Dream falls into quiet contentment as he lags behind them.

“The hot tub is over there,” Sapnap says, extending an arm in the direction of the covered jacuzzi.

Dream had texted George about it last spring when he first purchased it, but has narrowly mentioned it since then. He’s unsure why the confession of using it despite the heat of the summer would’ve felt too close to home. His longing for warmth, though dormant, is embarrassing.

“Maybe if it cools off enough, we can use it,” Dream muses absently. His attention floats back to where George steps out into his yard.

The green world softens around him. Grass blades rise low on his ankles, and bend in the same breeze that ruffles gently through his hair. A light sweat graces his skin, from the hours of the stuffy plane no doubt, and the strange humidity Dream knows George is unfamiliar with. Dark browns against sunny blue; the clouds drift closer to him in similar longing.

He wonders what George looked like, standing on his grandparents farm all those weeks ago. How many minutes did it take the rain to shrink him, down to bones, and shivering skin? How many

years did it take Dream to do the same?

“Has it rained?” George asks suddenly.

Dream’s thoughts snap back down to earth once more. His lips part in silence.

George’s voice was soft when he uttered the words, and for a reason he cannot place, Dream finds himself glancing at the back of Sapnap’s head before responding, “Since...summer?”

He recalls how quiet George’s whispers had been when they’d spoken of rain over the phone, cozied in faint drizzle and the smell of oncoming storm. Though he’s tried to forget, he can’t release the memory of downpour turning into lightning and thunder; a mimicry of his own destruction.

George says nothing.

“Yeah, it has,” he continues. “Nothing that strong though, yet.”

He nervously loops his fingers together behind his back. He hopes his answer satisfied George, because he can’t tell if he’d even listened to the words at all.

That is, until he watches as George’s eyes slip back over to the patio and overhang that Dream had extended a warm palm from, in June. His pulse jumps.

*Is he thinking about that call, too?*

“Forecast said it might in a couple of days,” Sapnap says.

Dream blinks. “You...check the forecast?”

“You don’t?”

Dream huffs, sparing a glance up at the sunny sky. “We really haven’t needed to.”

Mud squishes beneath the soles of George’s shoes, and he sways his weight to carefully wipe off the dirt on dry grass. “Why’s that?”

“It’s been the same every day since I got here,” Sapnap offers.

“The weather is pretty mellow,” Dream agrees. “I think we’re due for another bad storm soon, though.” His mind wanders into memories of power-less nights as a kid, howling rain and tipping trees. “Those are the ones carried in from the sea. They flood some homes, steal electricity,” his voice falls before he can steel himself for the sound of it, “and then they leave.”

George’s eyes flick to him immediately. “Like hurricanes?” he asks.

*From across the Atlantic, you’ve torn through Orlando before.*

*Will you do it again?*

“Yeah.” Dream forces himself to look away. “Like hurricanes.”

*Will I let you?*

He doesn’t like the way Sapnap’s gaze catches his when George hums, and turns away. He doesn’t like how it reminds him of the sound of the phone ringing, and ringing, and ringing.

They drift past the talk of weather, and the tour continues.

—

“I understand you worship your air-conditioning,” George mutters, his shoes squeaking against the hardwood steps, “but this is a bit brisk, Dream.”

Dream scowls as they reach the top of the stairs. “What do you mean? You’ve been here for two seconds.”

“It’s cold,” George says, and his voice echoes down the hallway.

“See?” Sapnap’s fingers lightly connect with Dream’s shoulder. “I’m *not* crazy.”

Dream swats him away. “You’re such a baby.”

“George agrees with me, dude. *George*.” Sapnap nudges him again.

“I do agree,” George assists. “Unfortunately.”

“You’re *both* babies.” Dream stops abruptly to force Sapnap to collide with his back. He grins, before he’s shoved forward.

“Get off me.”

Dream points at the series of doors down his maze of halls. “Here is your room, George. That’s the bathroom. Down there is—”

“My room,” Sapnap says.

“Yes,” Dream confirms. “Other bathroom is in there, too. There’s another room downstairs by the office, but—” He gestures lazily, before reaching to connect with the handle to George’s door. “This one’s bigger.”

It swings open. He’s careful to hover outside when George moves into the spare bedroom that he’s fussed over one too many times. It doesn’t hold much other than the bed, a dresser, and a half-open closet with board games and clutter stacked on the floor.

“My bags made it,” George says.

His luggage is at the foot of his bed, organized and intact. Folded towels and extra blanketing lay neatly on the white duvet. Dream’s teeth sink into the interior of his cheek, realizing how obvious he’d placed care into the makeup of the room.

“I almost expected them to be ransacked,” George mutters. He raises his voice. “Thank you, Sapnap.”

“Yup.” Sapnap’s response is quickly followed by the telling slam of the bathroom door. He’d been complaining about needing a break for the past ten minutes, and as a result, was grilled for the unprofessionalism of his requests.

“Not fit to be a tour guide,” Dream calls, smiling when he hears a very faint ‘*fuck you*’ from down the hall. His eyes wander over the off-white walls, his sister’s framed photography on the dresser —anything but George, and his suitcase, and his shoes as he slips them off his feet.

“Didn’t wanna track dirt in here,” George says. He nudges his absurdly white shoes in a neat line

near his bags. “It’s so clean.”

Dream hums in response. The familiarity nags at him.

“Did you vacuum—” George begins to ask, but Dream clears his throat. “Oh, sorry.”

“What? Oh, no, I wasn’t—I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Dream rushes.

“Then why did you—” George imitates the deep cough, poorly, “*huh-hem*.”

“I didn’t *huh-hem*, I was just getting spit out of my throat.”

“Sounds like what you do when you have something to say,” George muses, moving back to the door. He’s several strides away when Dream finally looks down at him, again. “So?”

“I don’t,” Dream says quickly. “I don’t have anything to say, I’m just—just nervous.”

*God.*

“You’re nervous,” George repeats. He steps into the hall as Dream sways away from him.

“I am.”

George smiles. “That’s dumb.”

Dream’s gaze is soft. His voice is warm. “It is.”

White rays fall from the skylight near the stairs, fuzzy on the walls and in the air between them. Dream can hear the beat of his heart, and the light shuffle of George’s socks on the wood floor as he passes down the hall in exploration.

Dream follows him.

George stops in front of Dream’s bedroom door. “You didn’t tell me what this one is.”

“That’s mine,” Dream explains vaguely, and the second the words leave his mouth, George’s palm is on the brass handle and pushing inside. “Oh—” The wood glides open easily as George enters. “You really don’t have to—”

He’s not sure what it is about the still air that seeps into their clothes in warm greeting, but it slows them both. Time sinks into molasses; dust carries from the sheer curtains. George’s steps gradually decline until he’s standing still, in the heart of it all.

His room has been a space of constant change in the recent weeks. Dream has rearranged his dark dresser and expensive setup, cleaned out old shelves and torn doors off of his closet. The surfaces are decluttered, more foam panels cover the walls, and sticky-notes cling to his monitors. He’s been determined to redefine what this place of comfort truly means to him.

“Yours,” George echoes with curiosity. He turns, and his eyes slowly flick over the furniture and broad walls.

Dream leans against the door frame, wood digging into the muscle of his shoulder. His hands idly find his pockets again, as he asks, “What do you think?”

“What do I think,” George repeats in a drawl, and Dream bites back a smile. “Hmm.”

“Do you like it?” he asks. Though playful, the question gnaws at his ribs.

They’ve spoken in their separation, but any conversation shared prior pales in comparison to this. Brief moments of lingering after group streams or quick calls for editing questions are *nothing* like this; George in his room, talking to him alone, words wary but warm.

“You could use a few more decorations,” George says dismissively.

He lets out a forlorn sigh. “I *know*. I’ve been moving most of my old stuff to the fan-mail room, or for the office space, whenever I finish that up.”

His heart pounds as silence settles calmly over them again.

“It’s very...you,” George murmurs, moving away from the center of the wide room.

Dream watches as he meanders carefully. “What do you mean?”

The black frame of his desk chair turns when George nudges it idly with his fingers. He looks impossibly small next to the mesh seat, in a room with ceilings Dream hasn’t considered particularly tall until now.

“I don’t know.” George hovers over his desk, observing the knick-knacks scattered there. “It seems like you only keep the stuff you really need.” His mouth presses together in a light smile. “Like this...snow globe?”

Dream’s gaze falls to the small, rounded object perched near his keyboard. The base is a brightly-colored scene of the ocean floor, with kelp and sand protruding with a physical texture that his thumbs are familiar with. Inside the glass is a dolphin, perched on a crashing wave.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “I set it down there once and just...never took it off. When I’m at my desk for a while, it’s fun to—” He makes a tipping motion with a half-cupped palm. George smiles at him, and his heart thumps in his chest. “You can, uh, pick it up if you’d like.”

George carefully takes the transparent sphere in hand, and mimics Dream’s movement. The glass turns, bubbles running along the curved interior. Flakes of white and glittering blue cascade over the animal’s fins.

“Where did you get it?” George asks.

“It was a gift,” he says warmly. “My sister bought it at the aquarium for my birthday, last month. She said she was torn between that one and a jellyfish.”

“That’s very sweet.” George carefully returns the snow globe to the desk. “Did you spend it with your family like usual?”

Dream’s lips part, before he utters, “Yeah, I did.”

*He knows me*, he reminds himself. *Of course, he knows me.*

George nudges something else on the desk. “And what about this?”

Dream cranes his neck to see. George holds up the accordion-style tower of sticky notes that criss cross as they descend from his palm.

“I get bored,” he answers defensively. He’d crafted the paper construction nights prior, when he’d considered the possibility of this moment between them. He’d planned to keep his door shut tight,

and not allow it to happen at all. Out of sight, out of mind.

Yet George has always had a gift for surprises.

He carries on moseying over the contents of Dream's room, picking objects in a shy manner and asking questions that are curious, and patient. When small stories fall from Dream's mouth to answer, he listens dutifully.

After a certain beat, Dream sheepishly glances up. "Sorry, I've told you this one before."

"That's alright," George says, and waits for him to continue.

Dream's heart refuses to cease racing, with George in the center of his room, the center of his world. It wracks at his nerves and threatens to reveal the furious fondness he's successfully keeping at bay; biting back smiles, fighting a flush.

He realizes he wasn't ready for the unexpected intimacy of this part of their 'tour.' It feels like an invitation to the core of his heart, and almost knowingly, George enters with care. His movements are cautious as he explores the room, and he seems to only touch items after Dream states it's okay.

"It's very you," George repeats, with more confidence than before.

Through the mirror hanging opposite of the doorway, Dream watches as George turns to meet his eyes in the reflection.

"Nothing flashy, *very* clean," he says pointedly, and Dream feels his face warm at his smile. "It feels honest."

Behind smudges and a thin layer of dust, George's echoed image pushes Dream into silence. His gaze slides away from the glass trap and to the real George's back, as he begins to read the post-it notes stuck to the base of his mirror.

Dream wonders, ruefully, what is honest about the way he's refused to move from the doorway, and enclose them in a small room together. Or about the leftover note, on the side of his mirror, words underlined three times that say, '*don't call him.*'

As though pulled by Dream's thoughts, George raises a hand towards the yellowed slip, and gently runs a thumb over the curled paper edge. His brows draw together as his touch falls away.

Dream's heart pounds.

George turns, and lifts his eyes to look at him. The deep-set brown and rigid lines on his slim face are tinted with what could be sorrow; what could be an apology.

Dream doesn't know, yet, if this is what gentle remorse looks like on George's face. All he can be sure of is that he's never seen this before, not from streams or video calls or messages late at night.

"I'm glad to have you here," Dream says, the words quiet and slow, because he has nothing but truth to give.

Somehow, George's expression softens. "Thank you," he murmurs, "Clay."

Dream's jaw tightens as the name leaves his lips. In all their years of digital connection, George has only muttered it when hidden from view. Faceless, like Dream has been, as if there was a confession there he didn't want him to see.

Yet he stands now, paces away across the room, finally out of the computer screens he was trapped in for so long. His voice matches his eyes, and Dream feels he may understand what it could be.

A door shuts loudly down the hall, and Dream sharply looks away. He can't afford to fall prey to his own wishful thinking.

"I just took," Sapnap says, laying a sudden hand on Dream's shoulder, "the *biggest* shit of my life."

Dream turns to cease blocking the doorway, and sighs. "Congratulations."

They're drawn out into the hallway when rejoined with Sapnap again. George slips from the room, and the only trace he'd been there is a figurine or two out of place. Dream carefully shuts his door behind them.

Once the showcasing of Dream's house has finally drawn to a close, they consider what to do with the rest of their day. George hesitantly points out that he took a red-eye flight, and is fairly drained because of it. They make a communal decision to do nothing, and as Sapnap puts it, 'chill with the boys.'

They sit in the living room and talk for hours, sometimes pulling out phones and sharing photos or humorous posts they've seen. It feels exactly like their mindless Teamspeak calls, where they chat and laugh and poke fun but end up not really discussing much of anything. Except now, when Dream poses a question that makes them sit in a contemplative pause, he can see the furrowing features on their faces, and catch small moments of George communicating silently to Sapnap like a pair of twisted twins.

"Do you private message each other when we're all on call together?" Dream asks curiously.

"Yeah," George answers, as Sapnap says, "All the time."

He rolls his eyes, and resumes searching for whatever photo he'd promised to share with George. Shortly after, Sapnap confirms that the right time has finally come to confront his leftovers from their lunch hours earlier.

As they migrate to the dining room, George clears his throat. "Dream."

Dream pulls a chair from the table, and lowers into it. "Yeah?"

George raises a palm to knead the back of his neck, hovering in the doorway. "Um, do you think I could take a shower? I kind of hate having the airport-stink on me, for this long."

Dream finds himself smiling at his hesitancy. "Yeah, of course. The one in the hall is better than Sap's, but the handle is kind of weird. The temperatures are switched, for some reason."

"Why," George says slowly, "wouldn't you get that fixed?"

Dream shrugs. "There should be some towels on your bed, so you're good to go." His voice softens, playfully, "You know you don't have to get permission to shower, right?"

"I know," George rushes. "I *know* that, I'm just..."

"Nervous?" Dream echoes.

"No." His expression is flat, but inklings of amusement trickle through. "Why would I be nervous,

Dream?"

His eyebrows raise. "Why *would* you be nervous, George?"

He is met with silence, a warm glower, until Sapnap walks up behind George with a warm plate of food.

"Scuse me," he says.

George steps to the side.

As Sapnap passes by him to tug out a chair from the table, Dream gives George an expectant look that says, *Go*.

The moment he has disappeared from the entryway and they can hear his light feet traveling up the stairs, Dream deflates in a face-first slump onto the table. He buries his head in his forearms, trapping himself in darkness and warm rebounding of his own breath. His hands sprawl against the wood tiredly.

A sigh, from deep in the rise and fall of his ribs, escapes him.

Sapnap wordlessly pats his back. Dream makes a feeble grunt in return.

"So," he says between bites. "How's it."

"This is a lot," Dream muffles. "Going from not really talking, to this."

"Yeah."

After a quiet pause, his hand is taken in Sapnap's and pried open. A warm, greasy parcel of food is set into his limp fingers.

He slowly lifts his head, and looks at the french fry. "Bless you," he says.

They continue to eat in comfortable silence.

When George returns from his shower, his hair is damp and frayed fuzzy at the edges. His clothes are clean, he smiles with ease, and yawns several times when responding to Sapnap's question concerning a movie for them to watch. If Dream harbors fond feelings for any of it, he doesn't let himself think or speak on it at all.

The rest of their night moves in slow grace, lost in casualty of couch cushions and disappearing sun. They turn on the television and berate Dream for the series of pre-recorded football games that hog his DVR. Though collectively tired, they combat the pull of sleep until words slur and eyes grow heavy. Sapnap begins to nod off with his head tilted against the back of the couch.

"Is he..." George's voice trails off, the low mumble from the television filling his silence. He's peering at Sapnap with an amused smirk.

Arm slung on the back of the sofa, Dream glances down at where Sapnap's head rests against the crook of his elbow. His chest rises and falls with a slow, tell-tale rhythm, eyes shut and dark brows relaxed in deep sleep.

"This is what happens when he stays up all night on his phone," he mutters, careful to not wake him.

George huffs quietly. “You’re starting to sound like a worried father.”

“I’m starting to feel like one.”

George’s laugh is gentle, and Dream’s eyes drift off of Sapnap to settle on him. Leagues away across the leather couch, the pale blues from the television wash over his tired smile. Cozied darkness of the night baits Dream’s breath away.

“Are you tired?” he asks, his voice far too soft for the jokes they’d shared before.

George glances up at him, and hesitantly answers, “...A little, yeah.”

Dream nods. “Right. Me too.”

The next episode on the screen begins to play, and he eyes the remote resting on the coffee table. Soft sounds from the speakers drift over the colorful buttons nestled in the plastic. It’d be easy, he knows, to lean forward and power down the entertainment before them with a simple click. He doesn’t make a move to grab it; George doesn’t make a move to leave.

He watches George’s heavy eyes blink at the television, and can’t help but indulge the small flicker of warmth in his chest. For a moment, he imagines staying here till dawn; dozing off, waking with stiff necks and aching spines, cleaning the living room in the half-morning light. He knows George prefers sunrise over sunsets, and wonders if Florida would showcase beautiful pinks and oranges from its eastern sea.

Then Sapnap stirs next to him, face turning and sinking into his shoulder with a sleepy huff. Even with his nose face-first in Dream’s armpit, he doesn’t wake.

Dream rolls his eyes. He glances up to see if George has fallen asleep too, only to find he’s already looking their way.

“Should we call it?” George asks, eyes dancing between Dream and the tired boy leaned into his side.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “I think we should.”

After they’ve shaken Sapnap awake to part for the night, and a blend of careful or groggy ‘goodnight’s are tossed between them, Dream finally sinks into his tightly made bed.

He wraps himself deep in covers and sheets, hums into the welcome of his cold pillowcase, but rest escapes him. His eyes become lost in the light glinting off of the bedroom window. With tired hands, he tugs the thin curtains shut, and his stare slides back to the wood of his door.

Sleeping across the hall, George is here. Doors down, Sapnap is presumably doing the same. They’re all together for the first time in years of wishing, and joking, and working for it.

The surrealism is not lost on him. It feels as though the moment he retreated to his room, and final silence echoed through his house, that this is all that’s left; him, his beating heart, the closed window and closed door. It could have never happened, he could have never gone to the airport, or held George in his arms, and will wake up tomorrow to feed Patches *without* bumping into his lifelong friends in the hallway.

The night is the same as it was before, when George wasn’t here. It’s as quiet as it was over a week ago, when Sapnap hadn’t arrived yet, either.

*I expected everything to change*, he thinks, as he rolls onto his back to stare at the ceiling. *Yet nothing has. Not yet.*

Stored in the drawer of his nightstand, his phone rumbles against the near-empty wood. The rattling sound breaks the quiet of the night, and he frowns. Very few notifications are permitted to surpass his ‘*do not disturb*’ boundaries.

He languidly rolls over, and tugs the compartment open. Withdrawing the device, his eyes skim over the glowing message on the screen.

George, who should be asleep, texted him.

His pulse quickens, and he swipes to open their conversation. The bright colors and dark letters make him squint, washing his features pale as he observes the message that reads:

*Your house is cool.*

A bashful smile leaps across Dream’s face in seconds. His eyes lift to glance at his shut door again, as though he can somehow see George huddled in the guest bed beyond it. He should find it ridiculous, really, that George is lying awake so late in the night, and wanted to reach out about such an unimportant observation.

His thumbs hover over the keyboard while a flurry of possible responses flood his mind, and he feels the comforting pull of triviality. He *wants* to talk to him about today, what it was like for them to truly meet for the first time, and how he too longs to retreat back towards their online messages to make sense of it. Yet they’re both tired, both uneasy, and simplicity is best.

*Thanks*, he types back, knowing he’ll get no response, knowing he’ll fall asleep with a dizzied smile at the very thought of George’s lingering presence, *I bought it myself.*

## Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading! though it seemed like many were concerned about a car crash (?) after the end of last chapter, that definitely won't be happening in this story lol. this one marks the longest installation by far, which I hope to attribute to my growth throughout this entire process before anything else :) it's a lot like seeing someone after you haven't, for a while - so much to think, say, and feel. they're all here, they're all nervous, and that's bound to make time move a little slow. I felt like he'd count every second they're all together on their first day, and wanted to portray that here. absolute dorks.

next chapter should pick up the pace for sure. hope you're all doing well, thank you for the patience and support :) long haul gang, i love u sm <3

# Eggshells

## Chapter Summary

The trio takes on grocery shopping.

## Chapter Notes

Please, do NOT mention this work in CC's streams, donations, chats, or comment sections. This extends beyond those mentioned in the fic, and to CC's of any kind, including the musicians/band. Though this work falls safely under boundaries that have been publicly stated, I do not in any way encourage the conversation of this material anywhere that could bring discomfort to other groups.

TLDR; Don't be dummies <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I won’t make a smoothie,” Dream says softly, glancing down at the kitchen floor. “I promise.”

Large, green eyes peer up at him with curiosity, and Patches meows in what he hopes is forgiveness. Even the implication of him pulling the blender onto the counter sends her running into the next room in fear of the noisy machine. During their morning routines, he patiently waits for her to finish breakfast and depart doors down, before pouring frozen fruits into the mixer.

His nerves drove him out of bed particularly early today, after responding to George’s aimless text in the late-night. When he let Patches out of Sapnap’s room, the lilac morning had barely begun to descend from the hall skylight. They’ve been happily existing in each other’s company as sun creeps into the kitchen, making breakfast and having their usual one-sided conversations.

Having abandoned her half-eaten bowl of kibble, Patches bats at his ankles again in a ploy for attention. He smiles.

“You wanna see what I’m cookin’?” he asks, hands leaving the skillet to scoop her from the ground.

Her small frame and soft fur meld with ease into his palms, and he holds her to his chest as they both survey the eggs frying in the pan. He watches her smell the steam rising from the yellowed blobs, and lightly scratches her head.

“What do you say, little lady—” He props her up on his shoulder as he reaches to turn off the dial on the stovetop. “Should I put in more salt?”

She mewls almost inaudibly at being spoken to, and he nods in feigned agreement. His hand returns to cup her thin back, humming idly as he pets down her spine. Her tail flicks against his arm.

“I could give you some eggies,” he muses sweetly, swaying them to and fro as she nudges his face. “But I don’t wanna upset your tummy.”

He’s about to reach for the skillet and slide the eggs onto a nearby plate when he feels her freeze in his arms. Her small limbs tense, paws shoving into his chest without warning. After a moment of juggling the wriggly cat, he leans her away from his shoulder to study her wide eyes.

He frowns, fingers soothing the fluff below her ears. “What’s wrong, baby?” he murmurs.

“I think she’s scared of me,” a voice says from behind them, and Dream jumps at the sound.

He frantically cups Patches to his chest, and turns around as they both relax from the sudden tightening of his grasp. He’s as wide-eyed as she when they both see George has joined them, hovering in the doorway across the wide expanse of Dream’s marbled counter.

“Oh!” Dream greets, steadyng the sudden spike in his heart rate. “Hi, George.”

His hair is soft and combed, his pajamas are loose-fitting and dark. Though his jet lag is slightly visible under his eyes when he blinks heavy, his voice is warm. “Hi, Dream.”

Patches’ claws lightly sink into the white fabric on his chest. He knows what George’s voice sounds like, in the morning, after years of early calls and sleepy mumbling. To see the slight flush on his cheeks, the vague clearness in his wandering eyes—Dream can’t believe how long he’s been robbed of such a beautifully mundane sight.

“You’re awake and in my kitchen,” he says.

George gives him a smile. “I am both of those things.”

Dream glances back at the stove. “I didn’t know when you’d be up, so I was just cooking for myself.” His eyes return to George in an instant. “I can make you something though, if you’d like.”

George shakes his head, moving closer to the counter. “I’m not all that hungry just yet, but thanks.”

“Are you sure?” he pushes, “I can easily—”

His attention snaps down to Patches when George tugs a chair tucked below the center island, as she flinches once again in his arms. The threat of George, it seems, radiates even from plenty of feet away.

“Hey, hey,” Dream mutters, relaxing his hold to ease the small bundle of fur in his palms. “It’s alright, honey. Just relax.”

Patches seems to keep a wary eye on the stranger at their counter, while she lets Dream hook his touch under her shoulders. She’s lifted into the air until her paws stretch out above him in resignation.

“There you go.” Dream’s nose scrunches when a pawful of pink toes is squished against his face. As he lowers her with a fond grin, he assures, “Don’t be scared. George is nice, I swear.”

He spares a quick look to see George watching the spectacle with an amused expression. His face warms.

“Very cute,” George says, and the ambiguity of who the statement is directed towards is sure to

haunt Dream for millenia.

He clears his throat. “Do you want to pet her?”

“You think she’ll let me?” George questions, hopeful.

Dream shifts Patches in his arms. “Maybe.”

He readjusts his hands so she can easily leap away if need be, and makes his way around the large counter. George rises from the low-backed chair he’s sunken into, and waits patiently as they approach. Focusing on the warmth of fur in his hands instead of the nerves in his chest, distance decreases between them.

The whites of his socks leave inches of sleek floorboards before George’s small feet. Dream is close enough to peer down at the light spatter of freckles that rise just above the scoop of his shirt, without meaning to. He carefully leans Patches lower to accommodate for the difference in height.

His eyes linger on George’s face, before falling to the warm cat in his arms.

“Slowly,” Dream says, voice low, “lift your hand. She seems pretty curious today, so you should be fine.”

He tips Patches’ head towards George, who follows his instructions with deep concentration. His wrist rises; his fingers reach. When the foreign touch lowers and connects with her mottled fur, Dream notices they’re both holding their breath.

George exhales, and the billow of soft air glides across Dream’s forearms. He pets down the space between Patches’ ears; she doesn’t stir. Patient, and cautious, the house seems to be locked in a standstill with nothing moving besides George’s slender hand down her back.

“See?” Dream breathes, as George’s fingernails accidentally graze his chest. “He’s not so bad.”

Softly, George greets, “Hi, Patches.”

When she meows quietly in return, Dream has to cast his eyes up to the high ceiling before his heart melts. Her approval matters far more than he’d anticipated. When his gaze floats back down, he steals a glance at George’s expression, as he pets Patches with a keen fondness he’s never seen before.

She shifts in Dream’s arms, and George is quick to draw his hand away at the first sign of discomfort. His curious eyes leap between Dream and Patches, seemingly apologetic for alarming her.

“She probably just wants to get down,” Dream explains, the warmth in his voice hushed, and fleeting.

George relaxes visibly. “Ah, okay.”

Dream leans over to let her step out of his arms, and onto the cool counter. She stretches on the stone in a theatrical manner, paws splayed out, before laying down in front of George’s chair.

Free from her distracting adorability, Dream returns to the stove. He scrapes his scrambled breakfast onto a plate of sausage links, the cold ceramic combating how warm his hands had grown in proximity to George. The task of handling his food seems more pressing now, with the obvious surveillance he can feel on the back of his head. He plucks bread from the toaster, and

resists the urge to adjust messy strands of his hair.

“I think she likes me,” George pipes up from behind him.

He glances over his shoulder to see Patches sitting on the counter, as George runs careful fingers over her back. She seems content in his company, unmoving and purring lightly.

Dream turns back to his plate, smiling. “Of course she does.”

“Of course?” George echoes hesitantly.

Thankful that he’s facing away from the island, Dream winces at the transparency in his own voice. His head aches with the amount of responses his intrepid tongue wants to say. *Everyone likes you, or, what’s not to like? Or, she has the same taste as me.*

“I told you she’s sweet,” he settles on casually.

His heart thumps in the silence that follows. In his hands, the toast is warm, the knife is cold; the butter spreads with ease.

“So how did you sleep?” he asks.

“Very well, thank you,” George answers.

The sound lingers in the kitchen’s ambiance. Their joint politeness is abnormal, to say the least, and Dream despises it. Reserved greetings and shallow words that he’s learned to have patience for are nearly even worse in person. He isn’t sure how to navigate what would shatter the brittle ice between them; he isn’t sure if George *wants* to shatter it at all.

“Is Sapnap up?” George asks after a moment of nonresponse.

“No, not yet.” Dream glances at the digital numbers on the oven’s clock. “He probably will be in about an hour or so.”

“Oh,” George says. “Alright.”

Dream’s fingers glide idly over the sun-spotted countertop, as he tugs open the silverware drawer in search of utensils. His busy hands rattle unnecessarily through several before drawing one from the compartment. Immediately, he begins to fiddle with the metal, and winces as the reflected light from the window briefly pierces his eyes.

“How was your week together?” George asks, and Dream feels a smile tug on his features.

The question is nice, and amicable, but what he hones in on is George’s strange persistence to fill their silence. He turns with the plate cupped in his large palm, and sinks the prongs of his fork into the mess of steaming eggs.

“It’s been really fun,” he answers earnestly. “We actually managed to cram a lot into it, so it passed by super quickly.” He blows on a clump of egg, before musing, “Though I do wish he brought his setup, or something, cause he kept complaining about using his laptop the whole time.”

He chews contemplatively, and sends a silent thought of approval Patches’ way. The smell is rich, the sun from the sink’s window is warm on his back, and it hadn’t needed more salt afterall.

“That’s not really what I meant,” George says, and Dream’s absent-mindedness is cut to shreds with one sharp glance upward.

George's brows are drawn together; guarded and wary. His hand has withdrawn from Patches' belly, and rests in a loose fist on the speckled countertop. The only clue Dream is given to know George isn't upset is the gentle rise and fall of his small shoulders.

He lowers his fork to rest on the lip of the plate. "What did you mean?"

"You know," George says, and his eyes briefly skitter away from Dream's face to return moments later.

*Nervousness?* Dream feels his pulse race at the revelation. *Is he nervous?*

"How is it, having him here?" George continues gently, blinking slow. "How...have you been?"

Dream's breath catches in his chest. Quietly, he says, "Oh."

He carefully rests his plate on the counter beside him. The seconds that pass weigh on him heavily, as they stare at each other from across the empty kitchen. His hands find the marble on either side of him for support.

His heart thumps as he gazes at George. "You...want to talk about it?"

*You want to do this, now?*

"Sure." George's voice is soft, and his brows tip up slightly. "Why not?"

Dream's throat tightens. He clears it quickly, and lets his eyes fall away as he wipes his palms on his sweats.

"Okay," he says. His attention wanders over George's expression as it opens, slightly. "Um, okay."

*Where do I start?*

"Well, yeah, Sapnap has really helped me out," Dream chooses cautiously. "More than I thought he would, he...he's always there even when I don't ask him to, y'know?" He lets out a huff. "I think it's been a lot healthier between us, lately. Much less dependent, I guess, even though I'm more present than I used to be."

George nods. After a moment, he pushes, "And you?"

Dream regards him with wide eyes. "I uh—I've been good. Really." He takes in a breath, and swallows away any lingering unease. "This kind of stuff is never linear, but...I feel like I can always tell when the weight of my life is tipping upwards."

*Or, he thinks, when it's tipping towards you.*

"So yeah," he continues, repeating, "good. I've been good. I mean, as good as I can be."

They let the sincerity of his words float, dipping through stray sunbeams and the egg-scented air. In a farther room of the first floor, Dream can hear when the air conditioning kicks into life. A chill is quick to invade the sharp corners and dark cabinets of the kitchen.

Dream meets his eye again, and dares to ask, "What about you? How have you been?"

The question is soft, and the answer is surprisingly simple.

"As good as I can be," George says.

Dream lets out a sigh.

He'd expected as much. After all, George once responded 'yikes' to a long-winded rant about an unfortunate roadkill accident, which had left Dream feeling morally inept. He knows better than to mistake George's simplicity for apathy.

Yet as he readies himself to move past it, his head stalls. He thinks of the beige walls and maroon couches, the tissues on Dr. Lauren's table and the blurred image of the ticking clock.

*Honest, he thinks. Be honest. I know how.*

He draws his hands away from the counters, and wrings his fingers together in front of him. His eyes dart away from George's face.

Quietly, he asks, "Do you think you could give me a little more than that, George?"

He hears a short exhale, and his gaze leaps to George's expression. Slight shock seems to be tugging at his eyebrows and lashes, fraying the curtain of complacency he's hid himself behind.

"We haven't spoken in a while," Dream continues. His voice, though firm, doesn't dare increase in volume. "And the last time we really talked, you...you seemed very overwhelmed, and upset with me."

George blinks. "Because I was."

*I think it's too much, he remembers George whispering. I think it might be too much.*

"I know, trust me." Dream's laced fingers tighten, and he feels his appetite slipping the more he hacks at the frost between them. "Are you still?"

*You're too much, I need space, I need time; Dream remembers George saying that, too.*

"No," George answers flatly.

Dream's nails dig crescents into his knuckles. "Well good," he breathes. "That's good."

Stubborn as always; distant as always. Dream lets himself wait a few hopeful seconds, before ultimately giving up the moment he knows he won't be forcing anymore words out of George. He glances to the counter at his side, and the plate of food he'll drive himself to eat, no matter how uninviting it may seem.

Careful to keep any signs of tiredness from his all too readable voice, Dream mutters, "I'm glad to hear that."

A beat of tense silence passes. His eyes pass over his breakfast, watching the fork as if he expects it to move on its own, while knowing George is watching him.

"I...I didn't mean to upset you, by asking," George says quietly.

Dream's eyes flutter shut. He'd steeled his voice so George *wouldn't* pick up on his frustration, but had forgotten how he can't simply hide behind his Discord icon, anymore.

He lets out a breath, then tries to say, "George—"

"You asked me, um," George interrupts with strength, but tapers when Dream's eyes are on him again. "You asked how I've been. And I...I've been..." He clears his throat. "I've been taking a lot

of pictures lately. A lot of them.”

“You...” Dream slowly frowns in confusion. “What?”

“I don’t mean like stupid photos on my phone,” George continues hurriedly, glancing anywhere but Dream’s face. “I bought a really nice camera after doing a ton of research, and got in touch with an old professor of mine, and have been meeting with her sometimes to—to discuss them.” His voice lightens. “And learn how to get better.”

Dream stares at him with flooded disbelief.

### *Photographs?*

He thinks of all the hours he’s spent listening to George muse over videos, editing, lighting and composition and lenses. He remembers chatting with him as a teenager when George was in university; how excited he’d been by the professors film-related course, and studying outside of STEM, for once. It falls into place alongside his other unveiled mysteries seamlessly.

Dream gives him a curious smile. Softly, he asks, “Really?”

He can’t convince himself the light dusting of pink that settles on George’s cheeks isn’t real.

“Yeah, it’s...it’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but for some reason I didn’t let myself,” he explains, and it doesn’t look as though he’s fighting his apparent anxiousness anymore. “I thought it’d be a waste of time, or I wouldn’t be any good, and now I’ve been outside a lot more and actually enjoying it and—” A short breath escapes his lips, and his bright eyes meet Dream halfway. “It sounds dumb. I know it sounds dumb, but I’m reconnecting with this *thing* I never thought I’d go back to.”

Dream doesn’t know if this is where he’s supposed to speak, to be supportive, and utter words of encouragement or praise like he knows George appreciates. He leans into his speechlessness.

After a quiet moment, to his soaring heart’s approval, George speaks up again.

“It has to do with thinking a little less,” he says, reaching to resume gliding a hand through Patches’ fur, “and feeling more.”

A stunned beat falls over them. He imagines George, with a dark camera and soft cloths, carefully wiping away dust and storing it in a long-strapped bag he undoubtedly keeps clean. Does he pull his knees to his chest, when sitting in his desk-chair, downloading programs and editing photographs late at night? What does the world look like, through his lens?

“You do think a lot,” Dream says, warm with encouragement.

George’s eyes flick up to meet him. “I do.”

He seems uneasy at the privacy of what he’d detailed to Dream, as if he’s never spoken of it to anyone else until their kitchen morning. It’s hardly an answer to the question of ‘*how have you been*’ at first glance, but he’d offered a part of himself up. He’d tried, and it’s more than either of them have done in weeks.

Dream gives him a reassuring smile. “Busy brain.”

“*I have the busy brain?*” George echoes, but he’s beginning to smile through his words.

“George,” Dream says, “when have I ever had a thought in my life?”

George pretends to consider it, before uttering, “True.”

Dream laughs, and the sound makes George’s smile grow into a grin. His eyes pass over the whites of his teeth, the shine in his eyes, and he swears for a moment they’re studying each other with the same curiosity and admiration. He’s never felt closer to someone than on calls with George thousands of miles away, and as warm morning slips into day, he wonders how he still feels so close to him from across the wide, wide room.

“So,” Dream says finally, grabbing his plate and leaning on the island before him. “What in the *world* do you take photos of?”

-

“Buy them.”

Dream turns his attention away from the shelf of aluminum cans, to see Sapnap holding a large box of goldfish between his palms. Curled on his face is a daring grin, as if they don’t already have two boxes of the orange crackers sitting in the pantry at home. It’s the same as the last time Dream dragged him to the store of white fluorescents and green banners; he picks out the produce, asks Sapnap for input, and is met with proposals for crap-food as always.

“No,” Dream says.

Sapnap shakes the rattling snack in a flash of orange and white, irritatingly close to Dream’s ear. “Buy them.”

“You’re so annoying, no,” he dismisses, nudging the box away.

He takes their squeaking shopping cart out of Sapnap’s way to prevent him from dropping the item inside. Lifting his eyes to scan the stretch of reflective linoleum, he frowns.

“Where did George go?” he asks.

Sapnap shrugs. “Last I saw he was in the frozen food section.” He drops a can of baked beans into the cart as they slowly travel down the row. “I think.”

Dream stops. “You lost him?”

“Relax, Dad,” he drawls, readjusting the black ball-cap that hugs his dark hair. “We’re in a grocery store, not some giant theme park.”

Dream stares at him. “I told you,” he says slowly, “it’s okay to admit you want to go to Disney, Sap. I can easily figure out—”

“I don’t want to go to Disney,” Sapnap says quickly. “Stop asking me about it.”

Dream scoffs. “Okay, then stop bringing it up.”

“What?” He turns his back to Dream, as if his denial is indiscernible. “How am I bringing it up?”

Dream rolls his eyes. “Just this morning, you made that joke about the waffles—”

“They looked like mouse ears on his plate,” he defends. “I was making an observation—”

“And the other day with the, ‘roller coasters are so much fun, Clay, don’t you think?’” Dream mimics, in a tone that more closely resembles Sapnap’s voice cracks at age thirteen.

“I didn’t say it like *that*,” Sapnap complains, “and I was just asking if you liked them, that’s all.”

His gaze narrows. Sapnap doesn’t *need* to ask his opinions on them; the first time they’d met was at the yawning entrance to Universal as middle schoolers. Sapnap’s family had flown to Florida for a summer vacation, and coordinated with Dream’s mother to schedule a surprise for them both. They spent the awkward but entirely memorable day together, in the company of siblings and churros and hot sun. They’d been scared shitless, then, to ride anything that went upside down.

Dream’s interrogatory expression softens after a beat of silence. “I can get tickets, like, tomorrow,” he says. “All you have to do is ask—”

As they reach the end of the row, a slender hand grabs onto the front of the cart and halts their snails-pace immediately.

“Can you believe,” George interrupts, “they sell thirty-two packs of turkey burgers?” He holds up the meat encased in plastic. “Who would ever need this many?”

An earnest smile leaps onto Dream’s face at the sight of him.

After their warm morning of catching up and what felt like pulling teeth to make George talk about his camera-hobby, Dream felt a grocery run should be in order. Sapnap came downstairs, corralled George into making fun of Dream’s overly detailed food list, and their day commenced.

Sparingly populated aisles, the faint smell of misted produce; their overseas visitor has embodied wonder from the moment they stepped into the store full of foreign foods.

“You picked the good kind, George,” he observes warmly. “Nice job.”

George brightens, and tosses the patties to Sapnap, who reads over the ingredients.

“Oh my,” he praises, “*originally seasoned*.” His brows tip up in an obvious mimicry of Dream’s buttery approval.

George smiles quizzically. He turns away, without catching the pointed glare Dream tosses at Sapnap. The burgers are dropped into the cart, Dream reaches to neatly rearrange them into the corner between shiny cans and sesame buns, and they move onto the next aisle.

“What else did you find?” Dream asks, watching with amusement as George scrutinizes the products lining the shelves.

“So much food in bulk,” he says, “and oh! Oh my god.” George hurries ahead of them, and plucks an item from the shelf. “What the hell is *this*?”

He extends his arm forward, presenting the squeezable bottle of cheese with disgusted intrigue. Dream gags.

“Okay, nobody actually eats that,” Sapnap says.

George tips it back and forth in suggestion. “Maybe we should try it.”

Dream winces. “No way. I have *bad* memories of cheese-whiz.”

The yellow abomination is returned to the shelf at once, nestled next to various dips and aerosol

cans under the same brand.

“You ate a lot of weird food when you were younger,” George muses.

“I turned out fine,” Dream says defensively.

George gives him a concerned once-over. “Uh-huh.”

Dream can’t help but smile at the back of George’s head as he wanders down the aisle. With the shopping cart rolling slow in his hands, the distance between them increases, and Sapnap lags to join him. They watch as George obviously leaves them behind.

An unexpected blow lands on Dream’s shoulder. “Stop smiling like that,” Sapnap reprimands. “You look weird.”

Dream’s fingers raise to knead the sore muscle on his arm. “Ouchie,” he says.

Sapnap jabs at him again without pause.

“Don’t touch me,” Dream scolds, reaching out to flick the bill of Sapnap’s hat and grinning when he blinks rapidly because of it. “You flinched.”

“Wee, waa, ‘don’t touch me,’” Sapnap mocks, shoving a hand into Dream’s face, smushing against his cheek and stubbled jaw.

“Oh, *gross*.” Dream pushes his fingers away, voice pitching. “When was the last time you washed your hands, man?”

“Right after I got done banging your—”

Dream hooks his arm easily around Sapnap’s neck, roughly bending his shoulders down as he knocks off his hat to make a mess of his hair. “You’ve *met* her, you can’t say that—”

Sapnap’s fingers bat helplessly at Dream’s arms. “Ow, *ow*, let go of me.”

“Fuckin’ shortie,” Dream says through a sharp smile, successfully turning his dark locks into a static frenzy. “Cut your hair.”

“Cut *your* hair,” Sapnap spits, before a harsh elbow sinks into Dream’s stomach and tears a puff of air from his ribs.

He lets go of Sapnap, clutching his gut while he doubles over in recovery. He coughs heavily, and rasps, “You bastard.”

Sapnap sinks to the floor in panting triumph, and leans his head against the shelf behind. Bottles rattle, he runs a hand through his hair self-consciously, and retrieves his ball-cap from the tile floor.

They both ignore the elderly stranger who stares at them from the end of the row, before leaving the scene with disapproval.

George re-enters the aisle to see Dream with his hands on his knees, chest rising and falling while Sapnap huffs occasionally at the dust they’d both inhaled. The cart is corner-first into a display of chips, with a few bags accidentally scattered on the floor in their scuffle.

“Uh,” George says. “You alright?”

Sapnap gives him a brief nod as he gets to his feet, and retrieves the cart. Dream straightens up, sees George's confused expression, and the absurdly large pack of ramen in his hands.

He points at the noodles. "Don't buy those."

George studies the brand, then looks up at Dream as he comes closer. "Why not?"

"That kind is disgusting, George," he says. He mindlessly claps a hand on his small shoulder as he passes by, used to the physicality after the last scramble of minutes. "They'll make your guts fall right out of you."

It isn't until he's at the end of the aisle, surveying the wide expanse of the back of the store, when he realizes his hand is tingling where it'd collided with George's collarbone. He briefly flexes his fingers; his palm had cupped so easily over his shoulder, touched so briefly to the warmth radiating from his jacket.

He turns back just in time to see George glance at his hand, then to his face.

George smiles, and echoes, "They'll...what?"

Dream clears his throat, and curls one palm in a vertical 'o' shape, while gesturing vaguely beneath the tube his fingers created. "Right out," he repeats.

"Is that...is that meant to be someone shitting?"

A pained look crosses Dream's face. "Yeah."

George studies him with a scrupulous look, that only wavers with an amused twitch of his flat mouth. "Let's see it again, then," he says, nodding to Dream's hands. "Come on."

"You're an idiot," Dream dismisses.

Sapnap bumps George with the shopping cart, tearing his attention away. "He's right, though." He pulls a face at the low-quality ramen in George's grip. "Go put 'em back."

George grumbles a low-breathed remark that neither of them catch, and as he leaves, Sapnap dumps the responsibility of the cart back onto Dream.

As he walks past him, he says, "You suck at flirting."

"What?" Dream whips his head to stare wildly at the back of Sapnap's shoulders, as they rise and fall with candid laughter. "What?"

-

Eventually, once rejoined with George again, Dream scrutinizes their cart of accumulated goods. His elbows are leaned into the handlebar, pushing the cart along lazily as they meander down the aisle. The list has long since been scratched off, although Dream keeps insisting they're missing something and Sapnap is sent wandering to find it.

"We need to get some real food, next time," Dream mutters, glancing down at the looming purchases. "This is all crap."

"*American* crap," George corrects. He's trailing in front of him, idly nudging small bottles and bright boxes on the shelf that draw his attention.

“You’re telling me you can’t get, what is this—” Dream reaches into the organized pile, and withdraws a boxed item. “‘Yummy dino-buddy’ nuggets in England?”

George sends a disappointed frown over his shoulder. “The dinosaurs are born and raised in Florida, Dream.”

“Oh,” Dream says, voice heavy with false seriousness, “my bad. I don’t visit the swamps.” He reslots the box into their organized collection of junk. “I honestly didn’t think I could get more concerned about your diet than I already was. But this is a new level, for sure.”

George rolls his eyes. “Right. I forgot you’ve been on a health-craze, recently.” When Dream doesn’t respond, he turns around and clarifies, “Sapnap told me about it a little while ago.”

Dream exhales. “Course he did.”

George peers at him, briefly. “You have a really expressive face, did you know that?”

“What?”

“Like that right there, yeah.” George smiles. “I wasn’t expecting it.” After a pause, he adds, “Heart on your sleeve, and all that.”

Though his stature is relaxed, slumped over the cart and languidly nudging it along, his pulse drums heavy in his chest. “What, did you think I’d be some stone-faced, unreadable guy?”

George shrugs. “Maybe.”

Dream’s eyes scrape the banners swaying in the air-conditioned breeze overhead, the bright lights glinting off the sleek surfaces and rebounding on tile floor. The fluorescents wash over the bomber jacket George had insisted on bringing, which he smugly reminded Dream of when the refrigerated aisle brought chills to his exposed forearms. With his clean hair, squeaky shoes, and curious hands, he seems strangely at ease in exploring the casual store from Dream’s corner of the world.

“I thought you’d be a lot more—” George starts, then cuts off abruptly.

Dream perks up. “A lot more what?”

“Nothing.” George tugs an unnecessary bottle of hot sauce from the shelf, and tosses it in the cart. “It’s not important.”

Dream pulls out the plastic container, and returns it to the row once he’s reaches its spot of absence. “Georgie,” he pushes, “tell me.”

George says nothing.

“Oh, come on.” Dream stops the cart. “You know that is going to drive me nuts.”

Once the subtle squeaking of running wheels has come to a halt, George turns around. He lowers a hand to clasp at the metal grate on the front end of the shopping cart.

“We’re on a time crunch,” George says, even though they’re not. He tugs on the wired basket; Dream grips the sides so it doesn’t move.

Dream gives him the most patient, irritatingly positive smile he can manage. Though charming, his grin is clear; he’s not going to let this go.

George rolls his eyes. “Fine. I thought you’d be more—” He flails his hands vaguely in the air, in no discernible pattern.

Dream lets go of the cart, and he imitates it. “What does *this* mean?”

“More—more close, in my face,” George stammers. “I don’t know!”

His amused expression spreads, and his voice is saturated with blatant confidence, as he repeats, “In your face.”

“More annoying,” George says sharply.

Dream smiles. “Uh-huh.”

Painfully bright under dangling lamps, crowded by long rows of assorted food—their conversation is nearly nonsensical. George glances down at where the metal bars bite into his pale fingers. At the opposite end of the cart, separated by an unspoken barrier, Dream does the same.

*Nearly.*

“Does it upset you that I’m not more...annoying?” he asks.

George quickly lets go of the cart. “No, of course not. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

“Okay.” Dream swallows, hoping his pinched brows and terse lips don’t betray him. “Because I can be, if you want me to.”

*I can be close. I can be touchy.*

George’s eyes lift to meet his. Though the casualty of their gaze in the midst of the grocery aisle shouldn’t hold weight, it does.

“I’m not...” Dream trails, searching George’s face. “I’m not going to mess this up.”

He watches George’s eyes widen when the word ‘*this*’ leaves his mouth. They’ve hardly acknowledged ‘*this*,’ them, the force that seems to squeeze the air out of his lungs and give him life to breathe at the same time.

Slowly, George says, “I don’t know what you mean.”

Dream is sure his expression breaks open at the immediate sting of George’s words. His throat tightens; his eyes narrow. George from their soft morning in the kitchen is suddenly lost before him now, the change occurring so rapidly he’d almost missed it. His face is blank in what Dream realizes is a ploy; hollow, self-protective, and dishonest.

“Yes you do,” Dream counters. The edge in his tone causes George’s expression to solidify further.

He turns away from Dream. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

Dream leans off of the cart, hands falling to grip the place where his lax elbows had rested prior. The plastic, cold in his fingers, creaks slightly.

“You wanted to this morning,” he says, low.

“Yeah, because we were in your *house*, not the middle of the grocery store.” George halts to face him again, with a half-whisper, “Not exactly the best place to ambush me, Dream.”

Dream stares at him wildly. “I didn’t ambush you. *You* brought up your expectations, not me.” His voice grows tight. “Are you seriously still going to act like this?”

George’s cold anger is evident. His reiteration is terrifyingly quiet. “Like what?”

The closeness that’s been growing from the moment they embraced at the airport terminal spirals, quickly, into their sleeping conflict. Dream draws in a steady inhale, and chases what’s been started.

“Like I’m—I’m this stumbling idiot who forces you into every bad situation,” he says. “It’s exhausting, and doesn’t make me feel good about myself, and—” He runs a trembling hand through his hair. “It’d be nice if you took some responsibility, for once. That’s all.”

“Where is this coming from?” George questions, voice pitching with strain.

“*Where* is it—oh my god,” Dream breathes. He steps around the side of the cart, and a foot closer to George’s rigid stance in the aisle. “Really? You can’t think of *any* reason I might feel this way?”

Dream searches his face desperately for any sign of life. He wants to reach out, and his chest aches.

George’s voice, though flat, almost seems like an invitation for Dream to step closer. “No.”

His hand finds the side of the cart for support, as he peers down at him.

“How about when you called me, George?” he asks in a murmur. “What happened then?”

George’s defense slips immediately. His clenched jaw falls open as his lips part helplessly, and his gaze drops to the floor.

“We said we wouldn’t talk about that.”

Dream’s grip on the metal bars tightens at the defeat in George’s voice.

It must have been in late July, or early August. On an offline call with a hoard of friends, quick jabs devolved into blunt insults and jokes taken too far. Many members were tired, tensions were high, and all it took was one comment from George for the hounds to be sicced on Dream.

He left the call, seething and wounded. Yet what genuinely hurt him wasn’t the tough night with friends that was patched with a couple messages the morning after—it was when his phone started to ring. It was when he picked up.

“George,” he’d said. The dark of his room amplified the hollowness in his voice. “What are you doing?”

“Hey, are you okay?” George asked immediately, rushing, “They shouldn’t have said those things at all, and I didn’t mean to encourage them. I’m really sorry.”

Against the warm screen, he muttered, “It’s alright. I’ll be fine.”

“Really, I just—I didn’t expect everyone to be yelling, and it got way out of hand, and I—”

“I said I’ll be fine,” Dream interrupted sharply. He pinched at the bridge of his nose, voice angry, and tentative, and tired. “Talk to you tomorrow. Okay?”

A beat of silence passed through the phone line. He considered hanging up, then, safe in the quiet and promise of sleep. He should’ve listened to himself, he should’ve hung up.

“Can... can you stay on, for a bit?” George asked softly. “Can we just... talk?”

His chest began to burn. “George.”

In the night, the whispers seemed so fragile, so inviting—almost like they could pretend he was there beside him. “Please, Dream.”

“Stop,” he warned. “Stop that.”

“I just want to hear your voice,” George pleaded, his voice small enough to disappear.

“Don’t *say* that,” he let out in a heavy breath, head tipping back to collide with his chair cushion. “What is wrong with you?”

“...I’m sorry.”

He listened to the quiet panting that fell on both sides of the line, chest heavy with a pained warmth that only George could elicit. The darkness and muddled words embraced their call like an old friend, and his eyes screwed shut.

“You know I miss you,” Dream murmured, with audible strain. “You know I can’t—can’t—” His ears rang with the sound of George’s breath clipping. “Fuck, George, why are you doing this to me?”

Instead of an answer, he said, “I sh—should go.”

“You should.”

Dream pulled the phone from his ear, waiting to hear the final chime that signaled the call was over. Yet George lingered, and it kept him from reaching to press the red button himself. An unspoken comfort lay in the quiet; reveling in each other’s presence during a summer drought.

The seconds of silence grew, and grew, until George finally asked, quietly, “Can we not talk about this? Can we pretend this phone call didn’t happen?”

“Okay, George,” Dream muttered, defeated and empty. “Whatever you want.”

They disconnected without any trace of amicable goodbyes.

Now, plenty of ugly nights and long weeks later, he steps closer to George in the grocery aisle as an unconcerned passerby skirts around their cart and conflict. He looms over him, wishing he could melt the bristling anger from his brown eyes, and wishing he had it in himself to be angry, too.

“You called me,” Dream recounts, even though he can tell George remembers it as vividly as he. “You talked to me.” He lets out a short, frustrated breath. “Then *you* got mad at me the next morning, and iced me out.”

He remembers that string of texts he’d woken up to; how George’s confrontation bordered on hostility. Dream let himself be chewed out, because nothing was worth losing the Florida visit the three of them had scarcely slotted into their tumultuous lives. It is so much easier to tiptoe around eggshells online. It is so much harder to ignore, in person, the memory of George’s voice in the dead of night.

“Because you let it happen,” George says, but he looks more vulnerable than before.

Dream stares down at him. “So it’s all on my shoulders,” he reiterates flatly. “It’s all my

responsibility, now?"

"Yes," George spits, his sharpness startling them both. He meets Dream's gaze, unwavering, and recollects himself with a deep breath. "Yes. Because you *made* it your responsibility, when you sent me that text."

#### Chapter End Notes

hi hi y'all! I feel like I haven't posted a chapter with a non-resolution ending in a while lol so this is a little funny. the poor boys couldn't keep their dormant issues all shut up for too long. what's better than some good ol' hashing it out in the grocery aisle? I did consider excluding the phone-call dialogue, but loved it too much to keep it out of the scene. lemme know your thoughts :)

I wanted to upload before stuff got super busy for me, not sure when the next will come but I promise it'll be worth the wait! slow burn keeps burnin'. hope you're doing well, even if I don't have time to respond I still see most of your comments so thank you for the love and thoughtful support<3

# Firefly

## Chapter Summary

Dream deals with the turnover of their day. Night brings possible amends.

## Chapter Notes

Hi hi :)

Please, as per usual, don't spread this work without my permission, or spam chats, CC's notifs, comment sections, videos etc. with mentions of it. This makes me and plenty of other people in the community very uncomfortable, and I'd hate to have to stop writing because of any inconsiderate acts that could have been easily avoided.

Important TW for this chapter // brief, non-graphic mentions of suicidal ideation and emotional self harm (around 5k word mark). It is in the context of Dream's interior issues and past behavior. Please keep it in mind if you are someone who is sensitive to this material <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Yes. Because you *made* it your responsibility, when you sent me that text.”

Dream’s body leans away from George before he’s aware of its movement; bated breath locked in his chest, the sole of his shoe dragging backwards on linoleum, lips parting in a wordless recoil. His face is hot with shame.

*The text.*

George said it as if he wouldn’t remember, as if they hadn’t picked it apart piece by piece over the phone, and Dream hadn’t apologized enough times or spent weeks trying to make up for it.

It’s harsh to bring it up now. He knows George knows it, as his cold expression changes to a fresh face of regret for his own words. George’s mouth opens, the words sink, and Dream sees it again; the strange, softened look of an apology that writes itself across his face. It’s not nearly enough to make him forget the accusation lingering in the air.

Neither of them reach to take it back, and it strikes Dream again in a wound half-healed.

*You can’t rewrite it, Clay.* His chest aches in recollection. *Do you want to be stuck in the past, or do you want to move forward?*

“That—” George’s voice wavers. “That came out wrong.”

Dream stares at him, and utters, “Did it.”

“Hey Dream,” Sapnap’s loud greeting tears into their aisle without warning, “have we tried this

kind—”

Their attention races to see him as he halts, several feet away, with a carton of juice in his hands and eyes growing wide. Dream swears he is best friends with an over-observant sponge of a man, because Sapnap seems to soak up the high-strung discomfort in the air immediately.

“Oh.” He clears his throat. “Sorry. I was just—sorry.”

He sways the carton in his hands awkwardly, eyes jumping between Dream and George. The juice sloshes against the paperboard.

For a moment, no one speaks. Dream has to remind himself they’re here, in the grocery store, not in a place for reactions and impulsivity.

“Again with the orange juice,” he observes stiffly. “Why do you keep buying that if you don’t drink it?”

Sapnap frowns. “I do drink it.”

“No you don’t. *I* drink it.”

“I’ll drink some of it,” George offers. He’s still speaking quietly.

Sapnap gestures dramatically to him, and crosses between them to place it in the cart. “This is definitely the last thing we needed.”

He seems to be the only one moving, when he pulls his phone from his pocket to check the time. George is averting Dream’s eyes; Dream is still reeling from the emotional upchuck they’d thrown in each other’s faces.

“...We can go now,” Sapnap clarifies slowly.

“Fine by me,” George mutters. His voice sounds empty, any trace of irritation having vanished entirely by the time he tucks his hands into his jacket pockets.

*My responsibility*, Dream thinks, as he rearranges the juice and glances over their food one last time. *My text. My destruction. My fault.*

He mumbles an agreement to finally check out.

When they move to the register, Sapnap tosses a quick, concerned look his way—all pinched brows and not-so-subtle glancing towards George—and he can only shake his head dismissively in return. His thoughts are still buzzing between their unexpected outburst and the fluorescent lights.

*It’s not all mine, though. Right?* He side-eyes George, who is entirely rapt in whatever magazine Sapnap is making him look at, and frowns. *I know that. He has to know that.*

Entirely mute, he tries to focus on bagging groceries. The beeping from the checkout piles up, boxes and chilled plastic slide into reusable bags, and he tears the receipt from the machine with more force than is needed.

He’s always been bad at picking fights. Jumping first, spilling too much, only to recount and rethink later. He knows how to be careful when they’re dealing with life from a distance, but in this suffocating proximity and grocery aisles of lives they don’t share, his heart wants to start fires to feel warm.

George has always been good at making him feel cold.

He feels his chest tighten. Quick fights, and angry whispers—is this the only way they know how to talk to each other, now? What happened to June?

*I ruined it*, he reminds himself, and a scowl crosses his features. *No. No. I'm past this, don't go back.*

He avoids meeting George's eyes as they haul bags into the trunk of the car. Pricks of guilt give way to low fury.

*I didn't pick this one all on my own.*

When settling into the driver's seat, the passenger door shuts, and he's surprised to see George has placed himself there.

Sapnap raps his knuckles against the glass from outside. "I don't think so, Georgie."

"You had it on the way here," George defends.

Dream slides his buckle into place and refuses to glance to his right. *Why does he want to sit next to me?*

"Nuh-uh," Sapnap muffles through the glass.

"Yeah-huh."

Dream twists the keys in the ignition and raises his voice to ask, "Do you want the gelato we just bought to melt?" He locks the doors. "Get in the car."

Sapnap relents and falls back to tug on the door-handle to the backseat. The tell-tale thump of his pull being unsuccessful makes Dream smile down at the gearshift as he eases off the parking brake.

"Ha-ha," Sapnap says, repeatedly yanking on the locked door. "Open up."

George laughs quietly, Dream bats amused eyes at an irritated Sapnap crouched by the car's window and releases the locks. He can pretend in the small shuffle of George's seat and light bickering when Sapnap gets in that this is normal, it's the three of them, a casual afternoon in a September that doesn't hurt at all.

Then George asks if he can plug in his phone, and Dream says 'yes,' and his knuckles nudge George's fingertips when he hands him the cord.

The smile falls from his face.

Because George's hands are cold, like his expression and voice had been in the store. He doesn't seem to notice, connects his device, tosses a remark back to Sapnap—and Dream watches him operate like a terrifying machine. He seems fine, awkward and calm as always, but fine.

*Why.* Dream switches to reverse, and navigates out of the parking lot. *Why is he so good at hiding?*

"Mind if I play some music?" George asks, scrolling through his phone continuously.

*Has he always been this good?*

“Go ahead,” Dream mutters.

He focuses intently on the road before them. Often enough, he despises his own attention to detail. If he could be ignorant of George’s chameleon-like behavior, perhaps he wouldn’t have to pick up on every slight shift and sound that sits at the edge of his vision.

“I added a couple things to that playlist you sent me,” George says, the words angled to land behind his shoulder. “It was already good, though.”

“Thank you very much,” Sapnap gloats. “Do you want to play your songs now? Let me judge ‘em.”

George rests his phone in the cupholder. “That’s the plan.”

So light, so easy.

*You looked right through me, George told him, once.*

Dream’s grip tightens on the wheel. *Because you didn’t want to be seen, George. You never do.*

“Oh,” Sapnap says suddenly, “hey. Maybe you should skip this one.”

Dream’s attention refocuses, and he hears the notes suddenly falling from the speakers and unwinding in the space around his head. He didn’t even notice *Helium* started playing.

His eyes jump to the rear view mirror where Sapnap is already glancing at him anxiously.

George picks up his phone, and frowns in confusion. “Why?”

“I hate it,” Sapnap lies quickly. “It sucks. Turn it off.”

Dream gives him a look. “He doesn’t hate it. You don’t have to pause it, George. It’s fine.”

He doesn’t bother listening to the lyrics this time as they pass him by. He thinks of the tires, the crunch of loose asphalt on the road; where the bottom of his shoe rests on the gas pedal.

“All good?” Sapnap asks.

Dream counts the blue signs he can see beyond the windshield; certain names help him mentally check the route home. After a moment, he nods, and Sapnap visibly relaxes.

“What’s that about?” George questions, and Dream can see him looking between the two of them in his peripheral.

“It’s nothing,” Sapnap says, at the same time that Dream mutters, “Forget about it.”

George pauses the music. “What’s wrong with the song?”

“I don’t know, George.” Dream’s voice hardens. “Maybe you should’ve been there.”

The sharp words shove them immediately into silence, filled only by backseat typing that Dream knows is Sapnap frantically burying himself in his phone. He feels the twinge of guilt for his lack of filter, a second too late.

George sinks back into his seat. He pauses, then states, “You’re mad.”

Dream's gaze narrows at the road. "A little."

"Okay," George says quietly.

His fingers relax on the steering wheel unexpectedly. He isn't sure what he thought George would say—an empty apology, maybe something defensive—but the one-worded acknowledgement takes him by surprise. He's not happy with how they left things, George knows this, and their current car-ride is not the time to solve it.

"...Do I want to know what happened in there?" Sapnap asks.

George is seemingly waiting for Dream to explain, but no answer comes. The silence continues without mercy.

"Right." Sapnap lets out a heavy sigh, followed by a flurry of typing. His ringer seems purposefully noisy when a gentle sound signifies a text has been sent.

Dream feels a buzz in his pocket, at the same time a notification from George's phone chimes through the car speakers.

"Um." George lifts the charger cord, and peers at his screen. "Why did you—"

"Out loud," Sapnap orders.

"You actually want me to read it?"

Dream peers briefly at the open group chat on George's phone. "What's it say?"

George clears his throat. "'Y'all being so awkward in here it's like...like someone shit their pants?'" He looks up, then continues, "And we're pretending the entire car doesn't fucking stink."

"Amen," Sapnap says.

Dream scowls at him through the rear-view. "What the hell?" He can't help the slight amusement that breaks through on his face. "What is wrong with you?"

Sapnap's dark eyebrows raise, and he returns to more aggressive typing. Another message pings both of their phones again.

The car rolls to a stop at the sunny intersection. Red lights and Florida license plates detach from Dream's view as George holds out his bright screen, and he turns his head to see.

"He sent us another one," George says.

Dream squints and mumbles over the words in monotone, "'You're still being awkward can you please play some music or something I'm trying my best here you both annoy me so much—'" A short bark of laughter escapes him before he can keep it at bay. "Okay, okay, we get it. Jeez."

George resumes the music, and after a brief pause, skips to a different song. Though Dream had mostly ignored it, he feels slight relief at the change of pace.

"You could just use your words, Sapnap." George almost sounds apologetic.

Sapnap scoffs. "Says *you*." Then, he points out, "Green."

Dream refocuses on the road to accelerate. He feels his phone vibrate in his pocket again, and he

rolls his eyes. “No need to keep sending stuff, dude.”

“Huh?” Sapnap shows his empty hands. “That wasn’t me.”

Dream frowns, and reaches down to shuffle his phone out of his pocket. He briefly glances at the notification.

“It’s from Karl,” he notes, before passing it to anxious hands extending from the passenger seat. He’s been hounded by George for texting and driving plenty of times before and isn’t eager to hear it in person.

Sapnap leans forward to the center console. “What?”

“It’s a photo,” George explains, unlocking Dream’s phone.

His eyes dance between the road and the sight of George’s fingertips gliding across his messages. “Did you just guess my passcode?”

George shakes his head dismissively. “You gave it to me forever ago, remember?” Dream rapidly loses his train of thought in recollection, and George guides him, “You said there was no harm in telling me, because I was all the way in England. Idiot.”

Dream’s face warms as the memory resurfaces; *You want to hack my phone?* He thinks they were tangled between digital screens, laughter, late hours on call. *You’ll have to come down here and do it yourself.*

“So you *memorized* it?” Dream asks, unsure as to why his heartbeat grows heavy.

Sapnap nudges George’s shoulder. “What did Karl send?”

“I didn’t memorize it, I just remember stuff about you,” George corrects absently. “It looks like a screenshot of your texts, Sap.”

Sapnap groans. “Oh god, I thought he was *kidding* about doing that—”

Dream quickly leaves behind the confused elation that’d been rising in his chest, and he grins. “Read it.”

“George,” Sapnap says, “do not read it.”

George giggles. “What a nice contact name for you. So many emojis.”

“Oh, come on. You *have* to read it.” Dream earns a stubborn kick to the back of his seat as if Sapnap can feel him thinking about the list.

“It just says something about us being in our divorce arc,” George explains vaguely, but he’s smiling down at the screen. “How come you never respond to me with such long messages?”

“You are so stupid,” Sapnap says.

“Oh yeah?” George turns in his chair. “You sure you don’t want a booster seat back there?”

Dream huffs lightly. He does feel guilty for making Sapnap live-comment his discomfort, but he isn’t in the position to be to be taking care of *everything*. Despite what George may have convinced himself, it isn’t all his responsibility. He doesn’t like the sound of a ‘divorce-arc,’ though, and tries to lift his head away from it.

“You would look pretty funny in a car seat,” Dream admits, and Sapnap scowls.

“You’re just saying that because you’re a simp.”

“That’s not what those texts looked like,” George fires quickly, and Sapnap’s irritation is pulled off of Dream in an instant.

“You know what, George?” His voice is firm, but Dream can hear the sarcastic smile rising on his face. “I can read, too. How about I expose some of *our* messages?”

Dream’s eyebrows raise. “Oh?”

“You don’t have anything good,” George says in dismissive confidence, usually strong enough to stall anyone on their bluff.

Sapnap sits up at the challenge, phone clutched in his hand. “You sure about that?”

“You’re an idiot,” George replies.

“Oh, man, *okay*.” Sapnap leans on the partition between the front seats. “Let’s talk about what George sent me yesterday, then.”

A theatrical pause blankets the car. Dream turns off the recently nudged turn signals on the dash, George is poised in stubborn disinterest, and Sapnap clears his throat.

“He said, ‘what the fuck,’” Sapnap begins. “Next text, ‘you’re dead to me—’”

Dream smiles, because George *immediately* breaks, turning in his chair and rushing, “Wait, wait, hold on—”

Sapnap refuses. “Then, and I *quote*—”

“*Sapnap*,” George pleads.

“Why didn’t you tell me—” Sapnap’s voice tapers off into ecstatic giggles as George’s fist collides with his raised forearm. “He’s *this* hot?”

The sound tears itself from Dream’s throat before he can attempt to process it, “*What?*”

Eyes wide, his cheeks warm; the flush carries down Dream’s neck and heats where his palms grasp the wheel. He dares to slide his gaze to the passenger seat.

George’s face is in his palm, elbow leaned on the car door with his fingers pressing into his temples. The top half of his face is covered, but the hint of blush on his cheekbones is poorly hidden. Beneath small wisps of dark hair, his ears are glowing pink.

A wave of roaring triumph crashes in Dream’s chest.

As if he can sense it, George mutters, “Oh my god.”

Sapnap’s laughter from behind them is loud and overpowering, drawing Dream away from his initial surprise. His head spins as an all too prideful smile spreads across his features.

“Oh really, George?” he manages to ask.

George releases his face from his hand, but immediately groans at the grin Dream tosses his way.

“It was a *joke*.”

Dream’s heart pounds. “Yeah,” he says, “sure.”

*A joke.*

George’s glare is pointedly soulless, but Dream doesn’t care. He’s laughing when Sapnap manages to wheeze out a ‘*great joke, George*’ and doesn’t stop laughing when George attempts to deliver a self-saving tangent.

He should consider himself an immoral person for enjoying how George flails. It’s a shame, really, that it’s *far* more fun to revel in his own vanity. The rest of the car ride follows in suit; Sapnap and Dream taking any opportunity to make jabs at George’s humiliation, George hardly speaking but letting them nag him nonetheless. By the time they’re unpacking groceries in the kitchen and passing light jokes, the surrounding air has lowered them back to steady ground.

Dream has almost forgotten the contents of their morning despite the dull gnawing on his stomach. He’s able to focus on shuffling items into the fridge, tossing out the old carton of juice and refilling its place on a purposefully low shelf. George is lining a tin-foil baking pan with their ‘lunch nuggets,’ while Sapnap disrupts the organized pantry with new food.

He’s humming softly to himself when he hears George say, “Dream.”

He looks back over his shoulder and ceases humming entirely. George has his eyes fixed down on the countertop, superfluous in his curling of tin foil over the pan’s edges.

His voice is low. “I am sorry for what happened at the store.”

The refrigerator door slowly glides shut, the magnetic pull leaving Dream’s palm silently. He steps closer to the marble island and leans down to rest his forearms upon it. In the quiet pause that follows, he gives George a chance to say more. Nothing comes, and he knits his brows together.

“I need you to look at me,” he murmurs.

George’s eyes raise towards him in an instant. His face is open, painfully so.

“I’m trying to be better, George,” Dream says. He lets every word sink, careful and raw. “I can’t do that if you keep acting like my past mistakes are all that I am.”

George gazes at him, his dark eyes searching Dream’s face. After a moment, he nods slowly.

The small gesture blooms faint relief in Dream’s lungs. *He’s listening. He hears me.*

Dream leans off of the counter, George pushes a frozen nugget out of line on the pan, and they don’t say anything more.

*We’re still not okay.*

Dream passes by him on the way to check the pantry. Before he can tell himself not to, he reaches down over George’s shoulder, and nudges the dinosaur back into place.

*But we’re getting somewhere.*

As he leaves, he convinces himself he sees George smile.

*Always, always getting somewhere.*

Steam collects on the line of his brow. Dream tips his head back, eyes lifting to the white ceilings as warm mist coats his throat. The shower stream drums heavy on the center of his chest.

After the groceries were dealt with and pits were subtly-smelled, Dream figured he needed some time alone to clean and recoup. When he gave Sapnap and George the quick announcement, they almost seemed relieved to have a bit of down time as well.

He collects shampoo in his palm and rakes sudsy hands through his hair. The screenshot read aloud in the car is still fresh on his mind. He glanced over it when waiting for hot water; Sapnap had been texting Karl during the ride after all, and George definitely left out pieces to spare their feelings.

*Oh god it just got worse, Sapnap sent. Please save me.*

*Are they in their divorce arc?* Karl asked.

Among other things, Sapnap replied, *Yeah, mimicking my parents arc.*

Dream's knuckles drag through tangles, and he sighs. The warm steam overhead clouds him.

He's not stupid. Sapnap is too good at mediating for a reason, and Karl's screenshot feels like a purposeful reminder of that.

In fact, he'd responded to Karl himself; *I know and I'm working on it.*

Karl reacted to the text with a heart, carrying as much simplicity and ease as always, and said, *You dummy.*

The humid air accumulating around him begins to lightly dizzy his lungs. Warm water stings his skin. He tips his head forward slowly and shuts his eyes as the stream begins to sift through his hair.

*It's the middle of the day, he thinks. I talked with George this morning. I fought with George in the grocery store.*

He begins to wander in a list. He touched George's shoulder, they bought the kind of seaweed snack that a high-school sweetheart of his used to eat all the time, the lady next to them in checkout had a feather barrette in her hair. He should get Patches some more cat toys. She seemed happy in the morning light with George petting her.

He blinks and runoff clings to his lashes. His mind comes back down.

He doesn't know where he stands with George. The more distance that is placed between him and his actions in the grocery aisle, he confronts that he shouldn't have pushed so much. No matter if what George said hurt him or not, that was *not* what their trip to the store was about—or their entire trip, for that matter.

*Friends first, Dream reminds himself.*

Soap suds slide down between his shoulder blades. His fingers gently soothe more away from his scalp.

*Friends.*

He thinks about the coldness that slowly thawed on George's face, and how his cheeks flushed when he'd put an edge to his voice. With every inch that Dream had closed between them, he watched his shoulders shift with hypnotic, inaudible breaths. He'd looked so small with Dream's broad frame towering above him, yet in his eyes was an almost defiant stoicism.

He breathes out and water droplets spit from his lips.

George's eyes were soft when they'd first met. His blush in the car when Sapnap read his confession was soft, too. He finds himself trying to picture George texting it—was it on the way back from the airport, or at lunch, or during the tour? His nervous glancing, from Dream's face to his phone, rapidly typing out, *Why didn't you tell me that he's—*

*No.* Dream's breath locks in his chest. *I'm not doing that. I'm not gonna go there.*

He turns the temperature dial until cool water flows from the showerhead. Once his skin becomes numb, he's able to continue in shivering peace.

By the time he tugs on fresh clothes and wanders back downstairs, he seems to have lost his friends, returning to a deserted main floor. Empty kitchen, quiet rooms—it's only once he sees his car keys still sitting on the countertop that he relaxes fully. The only cohabitant he notices is Patches, waiting by the sliding glass door.

He crouches to scratch her back and she begins to purr.

"Hiya, sweetie," he says. "Do you know where they went?"

She meows quietly. He lifts his attention to the backyard, as she idly rubs her face against his knee.

"Ah." He rises to his feet, keeping Patches inside with a nudge of his ankle and slides the door shut behind him. "What are you doing?"

Sapnap looks up from where he's directing George, a large blanket held in their palms and spreading out across the green grass. He takes two steps to his left, then sets his corner of the quilt down.

"We are going to have a picnic," Sapnap answers simply.

"A dinner-picnic," George corrects. He sits on the blanket and sets down their plate of cooked nuggets.

Dream smiles quizzically. "What's the distinction?"

"A picnic is for early morning to precisely two o'clock," George says, while Sapnap nods in grave agreement, "and a dinner starts at four. We'll be eating in the middle, so it's both."

Dream glances at the sky and hums contemplatively. "But it's only one forty-five."

Sapnap pulls out his phone and stares at Dream. "Did you just read... the *sun*?"

"Let's say I did, Sapnap," Dream contests against the absurd stare coming his way. "What then?"

Sapnap pauses and studies Dream's grin. "You checked the time before you came out here," he grumbles.

George laughs. Dream's chest flickers with a small lick of pride.

“It’s going to take us longer than twenty minutes to get it all set up,” George explains.

Dream lowers himself down to the quilt, and George extends a dinosaur-shaped nugget to him. He takes it and bites the head from its body.

“What’s on the menu?” he asks through a mouthful.

“Everything,” Sapnap says.

Dream squints up at him, his silhouette darkened by the aforementioned sun behind his shoulders.  
“Everything? Like, from the store?”

Sapnap nods.

“Oh god,” Dream mutters.

“It’ll be our American feast,” George says. “Like Thanksgiving.”

Dream huffs. “You know how much time and energy goes into a Thanksgiving meal?”

With a hand raised over his mouth as he chews, George shakes his head. “You’re not going to be making it. We are.”

Dream stares. “No.”

“Yes,” Sapnap says.

“No way,” Dream insists. “You’re not cooking for me. It’s basically our first dinner together, here, in *my* house—”

“Exactly,” George interrupts, and Sapnap tries, “That’s why we—”

He raises his hands dismissively. “You’re the guests, not the other way around. I’ll make whatever crap burgers you want, so long as you don’t lift a finger—”

“Where was this energy when you made me clean the house two days ago?” Sapnap’s voice pitches as he plops down in the space next to him.

Dream rolls his eyes. “Okay, picking up your *trash* is different—”

“Dream,” George says, and his attention shifts immediately. Seated on the blanket stolen from Dream’s garage with a plate his older sister once chipped in his lap, he offers an incredibly soft smile. “Let us do this, yeah?”

Dream feels his heartbeat slow in his chest. The blue sky stretches above them. As he looks at George, he wonders if fireflies will come out during dusk.

“Okay,” he breathes.

“Great!” Sapnap ruffles Dream’s damp hair in an unexpected assault which he allows defeatedly. “Now you’ll have to be *our* guest.” He clears his throat. “Y’know, put our service to the test.”

A quiet beat passes. Dream studies the look on Sapnap’s face and sighs.

George wipes the crumbs off of his hands. “Should we get started?”

“Sapnap,” Dream utters.

Sapnap begins to mumble, “Don’t start this again—”

“Just say the words out loud.” He reaches and sympathetically pats his back. “Admit it.”

They watch with quiet respect as Sapnap reaches right and ceremoniously steals the rest of Dream’s nugget from his hand. As always, he is overwhelmingly dramatic and unpredictably soft. Dream is far too aware that Sapnap knows the words to every Disney song Karl and Quackity elicit from him, but is hesitant to *ever* bring it up outside of his warm bubble of safety.

With audible anxiousness, Sapnap confesses, “I want to go to Disney World.”

Dream lets out an exhilarated shout immediately. “*There* it is! Let’s go!” Laughter flies between them and it floats ease in the afternoon air. “Proud of you, buddy.”

A quiet pause passes in which Dream waits for Sapnap to speak, who fidgets relentlessly. George seems to be watching their exchange from a distance.

“So,” Sapnap says. “Can we go to Disney World?”

Dream smiles. “Make me a powerpoint presentation, and I’ll consider it.”

George laughs quietly, and he dismisses the rising feel of success with a firm clearing of his throat.

“You suck,” Sapnap grumbles in response as he angrily bites into his chicken dinosaur.

They succeed in crafting a dinner of unholy standards in no time. Sloppy burgers, messy baked beans, bowls of various chips and candies that George insists they keep out on the blanket for ‘dessert.’ It’s a terrifying sight, but Dream allows it for the grins it brings to his guests’ faces. They don’t talk about anything other than light jokes, planning for streams, or tweeting images of George trying Triscuits for the first time. It feels good to be rooted in their little moment and not wander beyond the blanket and balled up napkins in the grass.

No fireflies visit them come nightfall. It’s likely their season is long gone, or local birds teamed with light pollution to drive them away—but Dream can’t help tracing his eyes in the fading blue overhead to try and find them.

George catches one of his glances upwards and asks, “Are you looking for something?”

Dream’s gaze comes back down. “Fireflies,” he admits.

“Oh.” George tilts his head back, casting his dark eyes up to the sky. He seems hopeful as he searches for a hint of glowing bodies.

“Lightning bugs,” Sapnap corrects.

Dream looks away from the sharp edge of George’s jaw to glare at him. “You sound like my cousins.”

Sapnap narrows his eyes back. “Compare me to those Sooners again, and we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Go back to Texas,” Dream says, “you absolute freak.”

He scoffs. “Just say you’re afraid of lightning and go.”

George chuckles softly.

Dream grins. “What’s so funny, George?”

After a moment, George looks away from the sky, and offers, “Glow-worms.”

“No way,” Sapnap says. “You don’t call them that. That’s not real.”

George only continues to laugh, which makes Dream break into a light fit, and Sapnap is roped in last of all. They quickly grow breathless as the outburst builds and builds.

“That’s so *gross*,” Sapnap forces out, and Dream wheezes in agreement.

After years of digital calls, their laughter piles together in the space that is tangible, reachable, rooted in the smell of cooked burgers and humid swamp. It’s not clipped by poor audio or metallic microphones. Dream can see it in the way that they smile, eyes gleaming bright, the familiarity is what brings them home.

In the midst of it all, Dream manages to declare between breaths, “Tomorrow. Let’s go tomorrow.”

“Wh—what?” Sapnap asks through a grin.

“Disney,” Dream says, and the look that crosses Sapnap’s face immediately launches them into another wave of laughter.

“*What?*”

George is giggling, and when Dream gestures to him wordlessly, he nods in affirmation. “Sure, yeah. Tomorrow.”

Sapnap lets out a whoop in celebration, loud enough to make George flinch. Sentences and the prospect of eating food are lost entirely to their ridiculous, stomach-clenching joy. The laughter sprinkles through to the end of their night, when dishes are cleaned and blankets folded. By the time darkness creeps in, they’ve stopped searching for fireflies.

Summer is coming to a close. The equinox is looming. Dream swears somewhere between long journals and sleepless nights, fall has promised to be kind.

The second night George is in Florida, Dream has a nightmare.

-

He wakes up with his own hand on his throat.

The pads of his fingers are warm over his skin, pulse, rush of blood that buzzes in his ears. His chest heaves, and his ribs rise against the length of his forearm. Staggered breaths snap him upright, hand ripping away.

*Awake*, he tells himself, thoughts swirled in dizzying motion of covers being kicked off. *You’re awake*.

Carpet snags beneath his feet. The cool metal of his door handle stings his palm.

*I’m awake*.

He yanks open his bedroom and spills into the hall. He can’t hear the sound of his own feet. He

thinks he feels a terrified Patches run past his calves, but doesn't look down as he rapidly descends the stairs.

*Water.* His throat burns with every dry heave of his chest. *Breathe.*

He could be coughing when he reaches the kitchen, or crying when his hands grip the granite sink. All it takes is one swipe of the back of his hand to his cheeks to realize, as his knuckles come off dry, that the *feeling* of tears is in his head.

*"I have these dreams,"* he remembers saying to his therapist, during one of the earlier sessions when he'd been too terrified to reach for the center tissues. *"These nightmares."*

His skull aches. The scene of the beach flashes behind his eyes, again.

*"What are they about, Clay?"*

He hangs his head, sweat drenched in a line down his back, turning soft cotton to dark grey. The bulk of his shoulders rises and falls as he reaches for deep, anchoring puffs of air.

*What are they about?*

The water, the sand, himself in the woods and a mask made of blood. With his hands wringing together on that low-seated couch, he answered:

*"Suicide."*

His eyes screw shut. The moonlight spilling from the window before him is lost in the immediate darkness.

*"Why do you dream of hurting yourself?"* he was asked.

His hands release the counter and shove open the faucet until cold water spills from its curved, metallic neck.

*"I don't know,"* Dream said.

*"Does it make you feel better, to hurt yourself?"*

His shaking palms cup under the chilling stream, filling to the brim and spilling over the sides. He splashes his face, the shock loosening his jaw, and gasps as droplets slide down his skin.

*"I don't know,"* he repeated.

Water thrums against the base of the sink.

*"Do these thoughts follow you,"* Dr. Lauren questioned, carefully, *"outside of your dreams?"*

He splashes his face again. His fingers press flat to the soft shell of his closed eyes, and he drags his touch down until he's pulling at his cheeks.

*"No, no, of course not."* He'd been so sure, then, until the walls of the room seemed to inch closer, and the carpet started to breathe. *"Not... physically, at least."*

The questions kept coming, and coming, pushing him further into the space he loathed to go. Answers were drawn out of him like the disgusting bugs and beetles he'd seen the purple martins cough up for their young.

*"How do you harm yourself?"*

*"Not eating,"* Dream said. *"Not sleeping. Shutting myself off from everyone who cares about me. Lying to my Mom and telling her I'm too sick to take my sister to her swim meets. Rereading my old messages with George, to justify why I hate myself all over again."*

He tugs on the collar of his shirt and furiously wipes the water from his face. The fabric is wrinkled and damp when it returns to his chest. His fingers refuse to unclench from the grey cloth, harsh knuckles pressing into his sternum.

He can't stop remembering. He hasn't been back there since he started to explain it all and thought he was free. Better. Moving forward and not residing in a place meant for reflection.

His beach had fireflies, tonight. They floated above the lagoon like stars caught in a shimmering trap, yet they were static, unmoving, and radiated a light that reminded him of long-gone jellyfish from the lifeless water.

*"With the other you, the one who comes from the woods... how do you feel about him?"*

He'd huffed at his doctor's caution. *"Terrified."*

*"Is he scared of you?"*

*"Yes,"* Dream answered, then his voice quieted. *"Probably."*

*"Have you ever tried speaking to him?"*

*"No."* His own words ring through his ears, refracting and resounding. *"All he knows is violence."*

He thinks of the encounter he'd just had in the same space that has wounded him time and time again. He lifts his eyes to the window and catches his own faint image in the illuminated glass.

*If it's only violence,* he thinks, eyes flitting over himself and the moonlit backyard, *then what the hell was that?*

“Stop,” he breathes, hand curling into the sink as the other clutches his chest. “I’m better.” His throat tightens, whisper breaking inside of it, “I’m better.”

“Dream?”

All the air rushes out of his lungs at once. He freezes before the window sill, and the muscles in his arms burn. He can hear hesitant footsteps approaching from the other side of the room.

His eyes glide shut.

*Not now,* he tries to say, but is unable to let out a sound. *Not like this. Please, not like this.*

“Are you alright?” George asks softly, his voice drawing closer. His steps grow louder as water continues to rush down the sink.

*Don’t look. Don’t move. Maybe he’ll go, just tell him to go.*

A tentative hand settles on Dream’s shoulder, and his eyes snap open.

George’s touch stays there, curling over his shoulder blade, fingertips brushing the bone that gives way to his taut bicep. It has no intention to leave—squeezes gently, even—no matter how much

surprised silence Dream lets sink between them.

George reached for him. *George* reached.

“I...” Dream croaks, but his voice falls flat.

He can see George’s other hand slowly move in his peripheral and fill an empty cup with the runoff from the faucet. The handle returns to its regular place with a slight squeak.

George extends the glass of water towards him, and after a pause, his fingers slide away from the cloth on his chest to take it. He’d forgotten the reason he aimed for the kitchen sink in the first place, and the moment cold liquid reaches his lips, he caves. He gulps it down until the feeling of silt leaves his aching throat.

The glass is refilled before his hands know what they’re doing. He chugs it again.

George flinches at the sharp sound of the cup returning to the countertop. The light jump of fingers, briefly jittering against his shoulder blade, shoves Dream back down to the space between them.

He prays George doesn’t find his words just as abrasive when he rasps out, “Thank you.”

“What happened?” George asks.

“Don’t. You don’t have to... to...” Post-sleep, Dream’s voice scrapes low in the night air. “I’m alright.”

George’s thumb brushes soothingly on the thin fabric of his shoulder. It drags right ever so slightly and returns back to its original place. “You’re not.”

Dream exhales heavily. “I am.”

“Clay.”

His shoulders drop. “It’s nothing, I... I just had a bad dream,” he confesses. “That’s all.”

“Oh.” The concerned grip on his shoulder tightens. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

“No, no. It’s fine.” Dream lets a short breath pass through his lips. “I don’t want to keep you up, I \_\_\_”

George’s hand slips down Dream’s spine as he withdraws from his shoulder, fingers grazing over the length of his back before disconnecting completely. Chills break out on Dream’s forearms at the light, simmering drag.

His eyes slide away from the window to stare, openly.

“Is there anything I can do?” George pushes before Dream can dare to comment on it. He looks familiar, washed in subtle moonlight, talking softly and lingering before Dream’s eyes in a way that makes him forget his panic. He wants to pass over him like he would in a dream, to study and appreciate the high rise of his cheekbones, or dark accent of his hair.

Yet his gaze drops to the splattered sink, and he traces patterns in the splotchy steel.

“Go back to sleep, George,” he mutters tiredly.

Without hesitation, George says, “You know I wasn’t sleeping.”

He slowly lets go of the wet granite and looks over his shoulder. “That is a strange thing to say to me.”

Turning his back towards the window, he leans against the edge of the counter. It bites into the cloth of his boxers as he wipes them with wet fingers.

“It’s the truth,” George replies.

Dream raises his dried hands before him to crack his knuckles, tension from gripping the sink released in loud pops against his palms. He soothes his thumbs over aching joints then draws his hands into fists.

“Why are you awake?” he asks dismissively, studying the tremble in his own fingers when he uncurls them.

From the corner of his eye, he catches George watching. His heart drops in candid darkness. Dream gives him a look of caution.

“Why,” he murmurs, repeating, “are you awake, George?”

“It’s the jetlag,” George says, but his arms fold gently over his chest. “My clock is all over the place.”

He studies the way George has his hip leaned against the counter, his pale hands lax on his biceps, cozied in pajamas and rooted to the spot. Dream wants him to leave as much as he wants him to stay.

“Jetlag,” he echoes, and George says nothing. “That’s what you’re going with?”

George’s mouth draws into a thin line. “I don’t think we should talk about me, right now.”

Dream’s brows raise. Maybe George has forgotten how he gets, at night; bitter and bold.

*Oh, he thinks, tipping his head, I’ll remind him.* “I thought you preferred talking about our shit in the kitchen.”

He sees George’s face break open as the steady breathing of his chest briefly seizes. Dream’s heart begins to pound. The thrill and fear that’d left him on the cold beach returns tenfold.

“I still remember what you dream about,” George says, quiet and slow.

“So?”

“I don’t...” He glances away from Dream’s face. “I don’t want to make you more upset than you already are.”

A short huff leaves Dream before he can stop it. “What makes you think I’m upset?”

George frowns. “You’ve been upset all day.”

“Oh,” Dream says, “have I?”

He hates that his head is crowded with this; thoughts of wanting to pull him closer, of wanting to push him away, how much he loves to fight because at least it makes them *feel*. He wants George

to get angry again. He wants an excuse to fall apart.

George watches him for a careful moment. Quietly, he says, “Please don’t try to fall apart because of me.”

Dream’s breathing slows to a halt. He forgets the arid clutter weighing on his brain, and his gaze grows gentle, searching George’s face. He feels his body turning towards him and squeezes the counter to keep himself there.

“I...” He hangs his head. “I think you should go back upstairs.”

“Dream—”

“No, look, I get you feel bad about...” Dream sighs. “Whatever. But I just feel like we’re going to fight if you stay and I... I shouldn’t do that, right now. That’s dumb. And I’m tired.”

Silence creeps into their conversation, slow and suffocating. From the corner of his eye, he sees George turn away so his back is to the window, too.

“What if...” George draws a hand to his face and squeezes at his temples as he’d done in the car. “What if we didn’t fight?”

Softly, he questions, “What?”

“I... I don’t think I have the explanations you want from me, right now,” George murmurs, “and I’m not sure when I will.” He sighs, and his voice softens. “But I’m still your friend, and I’m here for you. Okay?”

Dream studies the way George is guarding his eyes with his head tipped down to the floor. He wants to gently take George’s wrist, draw his hand away, and make him feel safe enough to look.

“You can talk to me,” George mutters.

“What can I say?” Dream asks, quietly. His heart pounds in his skull. “What... what am I supposed to say, around you?”

George’s hand slowly falls down and lightly clenches the cloth on his own chest. “Whatever you want.”

“That is *not* true,” Dream says, words rushing from his mouth before he has a chance to catch them. His face warms, and he attempts to rephrase, “We—we have to be mindful. That’s what we agreed, right?”

“I know,” George says lightly. “But ‘mindful’ doesn’t have to be... so quiet, I guess.”

A confused frown tugs on Dream’s features. “You’re saying I should talk more? About what?”

“You could tell me about your nightmare,” George offers.

He blinks away the thought of the beach and swallows dryly. “...Why?”

“I don’t know.”

They both have their eyes fixed ahead to the counter or cold floor or pale cabinets. The only warmth that has remained from their morning is trapped between Dream’s palms, and the counter behind them.

“Maybe... maybe it’ll feel like normal,” George says.

“Oh.” Dream feels the pull of an unexpected, small smile. “Talking about my psycho-dreams is our normal?”

George looks at him. “It used to be.”

The moonlight on his back cools his skin and heat escapes where his bare feet are touching the floor. Dream thinks of their morning, how they’d started and where they’re ending. George asking him how he’d been, George shutting off in the grocery store, his pink face in the car; his generosity at dinner.

He draws in a deep breath. *I trust him.* As soon as it surfaces, he challenges his own thought, *Why?*

“After everything,” he says, “you stay up. You haunt my kitchen. And now you want to listen to me?”

George nods curtly.

He huffs. “I don’t understand you.”

“I don’t understand me, either,” George says.

Dream feels the subtle warmth radiating in his cheeks and studies the lines on the cold floor. They stand for a moment in uninterrupted company, both breathing quietly, not concerned with time or the presence of tomorrow. His world zeroes in on their quiet, loaded kitchen.

“I haven’t had one in a while,” Dream murmurs. “I almost forgot what it was like to be there.”

He sees George’s head turn in the side of his vision, but no words fall.

“Sometimes, I get them constantly,” he continues. “Y’know, days on end, multiple a night. Or they don’t come at all, and I’m able to dream like normal.” He shifts his hands against the counter, trying to ease his shoulders. “I didn’t have one for a few weeks, and I started to think... maybe. Just maybe, this time around, they’ll be gone for good.”

“I’m... sorry,” George says. “How bad was it?”

“It was different.” Dream lifts his eyes and stares dead at the island before him. “This one was different.”

The white beach, the dark lagoon, looming woods that make no sound unless he is there to hear it.

“Everything was the same as it had been when I left,” he says. “And I guess I’d lost, last time. My brain kept the score.”

“You woke up by the water?”

*He remembers.* Dream nods slowly, his jaw tight. *From one, brief conversation months ago—George still remembers.*

“I waited for him to come like I normally do. I waited, and waited, but... he didn’t show.” Dream’s voice drops. “I should’ve been relieved that he was gone, George, I should’ve been happy, but—but I had this pit in my stomach. Like I was missing something.”

He remembers rising from his crouch in the sand, turning his masked face towards the space

twenty meters behind and moving away from the water.

“I walked towards the forest,” he whispers. “I went there to find him, and as I came closer, he... he was standing in there. Just a silhouette, just a shadow.”

“Dream,” George says, softly.

He can feel the shakiness in his own voice growing. “He didn’t chase me, and I didn’t run. I just stood there, *staring* at him—at me. Staring at me.” He pauses and carefully clears the threat of oncoming tears from his throat. “Have you ever been so afraid of something, so goddamn terrified that—that you *want* to give in? You want to let it happen?”

His chest rises and falls rapidly as his nails dig into the underside of the counter’s edge.

“Yes,” George breathes, and Dream’s eyes flick sharply to his left.

Confusion muddles inside of his chest.

*We’re... standing close, aren’t we?* Dream feels the warm brush of George’s elbow against his forearm. *Aren’t we?*

“I felt that pull,” he says slowly, “to let it. He wasn’t attacking me, and I didn’t have to defend myself. I was... safe. So I raised my hand.” He lifts his palm in a slow greeting, and his fingers slowly close in recollection. “And he mimicked me. Without missing a beat, he did the same exact thing. It was like looking at a fucked up, funhouse mirror.”

Several seconds pass where he recollects himself before George asks, “What then?”

“I tried to talk to him, and my voice echoed. But he started moving, or I did, I’m not sure who really...” Dream frowns, then carefully cups a hand under his own jaw. “Like this. It felt necessary to hold here, like my face would slip off if I let go. That’s when I—we—reached for the mask.” His other hand rises, suspended in the dark air, fingers outstretched towards the bridge of his nose. “I watched him slowly bring his hand up, and up, and when I was *inches* away from feeling it beneath my fingertips, I—”

His hands slip from his face and fall to his sides. The back of his wrists hit the counter.

“I woke up,” he says. “My hand was still on my throat.”

The final note rings clear through the kitchen and flattens them into a silence, long and pensive, broken only by his soft breathing and thump of his heart. His head aches. He can’t stop wondering what would’ve been beneath that mask had he been able to pull it off.

George clears his throat. “What does all of that mean, to you?”

He presses his lips together to hide a sardonic smirk. “Since when do dreams have to mean anything?”

George gives him a look. He smiles.

“I think... it may be for the best that you had one again,” George mutters. “Even though you didn’t want to.”

“What makes you say that?”

He raises a brow. “Not getting murdered there for the first time ever is probably a good thing.”

“Well—” Dream clears his throat. He thinks of George by the side of the lapping lagoon, and his face grows hot. “Not the first time, actually.”

“Oh?” George frowns, then his eyes widen in realization. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” His hand detaches from the counter to awkwardly scratch the back of his head. “I guess it kinda makes sense that I’d have another dream... when you’re...” He gestures vaguely to him and doesn’t know where to place his hand afterwards.

“So I’m the common denominator?” George jokes but it lands in a space too soft; too careful.

Dream feels a response rise on the tip of his tongue. He’s never told him what really happened in that dream, and no matter how much he wants to, he bites it back.

“George,” he mutters instead, “what are you doing here?”

“I... said I wanted to help—”

“No,” Dream says. “No. In Florida, George.” His voice falls hushed and tired. “Why are you here?”

“I thought we weren’t fighting,” he responds carefully.

Dream stares at him. “Are we?” He gets no answer. “Okay, if you keep doing that, maybe we will be.”

George huffs and leans off of the counter. “I don’t think you’ll like what I have to say.”

“It can’t be worse than not knowing,” he pushes, exasperation hanging off of every syllable. “You’ve been trying to make it up to me all day, I get that, but this will do it. *Talk to me.*”

“You say that like it’s easy,” George hushes.

His chest aches. “Why did you agree to come?”

“Because I *missed* you,” George lets out, words falling faster than the brittle air can catch, “I missed you and wanted to meet you and now that I’m here—” His words give way to an abrupt, shaky exhale.

*He missed me.* The words falling from George’s mouth fills him with such a sad, lonely joy. *Was it the same way I missed him?*

“...Now that you’re here?” Dream echoes, his voice soft with surprise.

“Now that I’m here,” George continues quietly, “I still miss you.”

*Still.* Dream’s head spins. *Still?*

“Wh—what does that...” he trails off as George’s hand lightly settles on his wrist.

His gaze falls towards it immediately. George’s fingers are tentative when they brush against bone; chilled when they shift against his warm skin.

“You’re so far away,” George says softly, “and I know that’s because of me. But you’re... you’re not being you.”

Dream's fingers twitch against the counter and brush the underside of George's forearm. He curls his fingertips into his palm so it doesn't happen again.

"Dream." George's grasp squeezes, pale fingers snaking up his arm, bold and chilling. "It's okay. I'm okay."

His eyes raise to meet his dark brown gaze, heart pounding in his chest. "You're confusing me, again."

"If you want to—to be more *you*, then you can. I'm okay." George's face is earnest, brows pinched together in hope of being understood. "Be more *you*."

Dream's lips part as his breath leaves him.

*I thought you'd be more: in my face, annoying, touchy, close*, he pieces George's words together as they collect with gentle realization. *I thought you'd be more you.*

He reaches for George's shoulder. *Easy*. Every inch of his palm that curves over thin collarbone is warm. *Careful*.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, and he draws George to his chest as he wraps his arms around him.

He isn't sure if this is what George wanted; if this is what they should do. His hold is open, and warm, and gentle. His mind once again rewrites at how *small* George is, fitting under his chin effortlessly, swallowed and paralyzed by his tall frame.

"I...I shouldn't have forced you to talk like that, in public," Dream murmurs. "I know better."

George slowly stirs to life in his arms, hands creeping around Dream's torso, and he hugs him back.

Their first embrace was in front of an entire terminal, busy with a faint hum of planes in the sky above. This one is for them, only, made of shifting hands and the quiet kitchen and moonlight. George's head rests against Dream's sternum, as they breathe, warm and steady.

"It's alright," George whispers, weakly.

Dream lowers his cheek to the top of his hair. "It's not."

"I deserved it. I was a dick."

He laughs gently and feels George smile against his chest at the sound. "Okay, maybe."

His amusement subsides, and he lets his attention focus on the warmth pressing from his ribs to his thighs. He feels the urge to say more, ask more, and talk it dead—but they've talked for years already. After endless conversations, he can swipe a thumb across the small of George's back, or brush idly through his dark hair. So long as he's careful and smart, they can have this.

"I'm sorry for upsetting you," Dream mutters, even though he doesn't have to.

George's lashes flutter against his t-shirt. His fingers trail lightly over Dream's back, tracing where muscle dips to the line of his spine in a way that is sure to live in his head forever.

"Only took you two days to break the pact," George says, voice tinged with light amusement.

Dream smiles. "No, did I really?"

George's head pulls away from his chest, making Dream's hand slip to the base of his neck. "You definitely did," he says, labored with sarcastic hurt.

"Darn." He sighs dramatically. "What's my punishment, again?"

George's hands fall to rest on Dream's lower back. "Sapnap said a kiss-wiss," he recalls with contempt. His face of disgust quickly melts to a grin when Dream laughs.

"Got it." Caught up in theatrics, he tugs George close to his chest and jokes, "So are you asking me to kiss you, George?"

Any trace of a smile quickly falls from George's face, replaced by wide eyes and locked breathing before Dream realizes a change occurred. He freezes as his words echo back to him, glancing down.

George is staring up at him, terrified.

*Shit.*

Drawn in by the semblance of normality, his tongue slipped, and the joke didn't land. His heart pounds in erratic, untamable beats, repeating over and over again: *take it back, take it back, take it back.*

"I..." Dream begins, but George isn't looking away from him.

George brought it up. He knew, he remembered, and *he* brought it up. The longer it hangs in the air, the longer their hands linger, and they don't let go.

Dream could keep them stuck here, forever, in the panicked growing of shallow breaths, unsure where to step or how to press undo. Chest against chest, thighs brushing George's pajamas, his palm dares to spread against the small of George's spine.

Maybe he *meant* for it to come out wrong, as a forlorn wish, tangled in confession. Maybe he should follow it; become it.

*Be more you.*

He doesn't think when he begins to pull George closer, warm palm cupping the back of his head. He doesn't breathe when his determined movements are met with pliancy, and George's jaw tips up.

*This, Dream's mind calls faintly as it floats away, this is me.*

He dips down, close enough until he can feel his breath rebound, and softly kisses George's forehead. Warmth presses between his lips and smooth skin, filling him with an impossible rush. His brows draw together in deep strain.

George's breath hitches. "Dr... Dream," he whispers, hands curling into the fabric on his back.

Dream carefully pulls his mouth away from the warmth of George's face. The tip of George's nose brushes against his cheek; he can feel his exhales hot on his neck.

His heart is in his throat. George clings to him unmoving with eyes screwed shut.

Dream's lips part, and he murmurs, "Goodnight, George."

The warmth slips from his palms as he slides his hands away, and he leaves George at the kitchen sink.

## Chapter End Notes

ayoooooooo!!

I guess long chapters are just a thing for this story now lol. the final scene has been in my head for a while, and I spent a lot of time writing and rewriting, trying to get the tone of their interactions right without moving too slow or advancing too far. their characterization ended up making me feel nostalgic for their softer scenes in heat waves, so I took that as a good sign :) feels like a weight off of dream's chest, and mine. hope you enjoyed it as much as I did!

thank you for all the love and patience, it means a lot to me just how many of you leave such nice comments, and are so forgiving about my timeline :) it's super comforting, and I appreciate that so much! updates will stay around every two weeks, but life does sometimes get in the way <3

# Water

## Chapter Summary

A change in weather means a change of plans.

## Chapter Notes

Please, as per usual, don't spread this work without my permission, or spam chats, CC's notifs, comment sections, videos etc. with mentions of it. Also, I discourage any reuploads of this work onto other sites, I haven't given anyone permission to do so (unless translated versions). I ask that if you're someone who is intentionally stealing my work and posting it elsewhere...please, at the least, use the right italicization where this version does...like c'mon lol it's not that hard

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's raining on the day they're meant to go to Disney.

Gentle thrumming on the roof gutter, a slight chill to the morning air; Dream's eyes slowly open to the sight of a pale window marred only by faded, white curtains. The sound of rain trickles down his spine, and settles low in his lungs with a contented sigh.

He lightly nudges the cloth away from the windowsill to study drops rolling down the glass. The sky beyond is a muted gray. Downpour continues in a steady rhythm.

He smiles, and sinks back into his pillows. The house is entirely quiet. Patches seems to be the only warm, breathing thing besides himself, curled up to his side restfully.

Careful to not disturb her, he reaches for the nightstand and pulls his phone from the drawer. The time says eleven, and he guesses it means morning. The tiredness heavy on his eyelids and dryness in his throat does argue that perhaps, maybe, he slept all day and woke during wet nightfall.

Several notifications lay bright on his cold screen.

*Weather is shit, man*, Sapnap sent a few hours prior, with a preview of the day's forecast attached. *Can we try for tomorrow?*

Dream studies it with a frown. Busy thunderstorms, nothing too serious, but likely not ideal for his friend's return to the theme park. It's rained at Disney before when he was a kid, and though most of the magic of the place is often lost on him, something about the colored lights reflected in puddles and slick metal on coaster seats can feel dreamlike. He's not sure Sapnap would agree.

He glances at the other series of messages waiting for him, all from George.

His phone flattens against his chest immediately.

*George.*

He stares at the ceiling with wide eyes, tracing over white paint and slices of the fan as though he can see George's face in the moonlight beyond it. His thick, sleep-ridden brain works through its stupor to relive the kitchen, the hands on his back, and the feel of George's breath on his throat.

*Right.*

His eyes flutter shut. Fingernails on his spine, the soft declaration of a wordless kiss—he could have left them in ruin. He'd passed out promptly after returning to his room, and didn't dream again for the rest of the night. It's as though he put everything he had into the confession of his nightmare; the tenderness of that embrace. Still drained, he nervously tilts his phone back into view.

Shortly after Sapnap's text, George sent: *Not sure if you're up yet, but I think our plans are tanked. Any ideas?*

From what Dream can tell, the tone is casual. Casualty is a yellow light, with George, and Dream happens to be quite fond of that color. His eyes fall to the blue messages beneath it, that suddenly become much more indecipherable.

*You're still not up so I hope you're sleeping well, it says. I know I didn't.*

He sits up in bed. White fluff of covers on his chest accidentally fall over Patches' head, and he quickly hushes an apology while he pulls them off.

He reads it, and rereads it, and draws in a light inhale. *Easy, and careful*, he muses to himself. *Be easy, be careful, be more...*

Dream dares to type back, *Why is that?*

The response is immediate.

*You kissed me*, George texts. Then, he adds, *Dumbass.*

A surprised smile leaps across Dream's face, eyebrows raising with a flush to his cheeks. Against the cold sheath of outside rain, nestled under the cocoon of covers, his heart begins to pound.

His expression softens as he realizes how normal it feels to be texting George first thing in the morning, again.

*I didn't KISS kiss you*, he corrects boldly. Even the sight of George's quick bubble appearing and reappearing makes Dream's head slightly dizzy.

He half expects his phone to remain dormant, and grins when it buzzes again.

*Ok and?*

He laughs, gently. His mind slips back to the careful worry in George's voice that soothed him, the secure feeling of holding him in privacy, and faint relief spreads through his core. He hoped and prayed he didn't overstep, and for once, he's actually right.

*And you're a wuss*, Dream replies.

*Stop texting and come downstairs.*

Dream relaxes further into his pillows and blankets. *No. Don't feel like it.*

He definitely wakes Patches when he nearly jumps out of his skin, because his phone starts to ring unexpectedly. The vibrations cut across the sweet silence that had settled in his room, and he stares at George's contact like he's never seen it before.

That's not true, though. He *has* seen it before. In fact, the last time he truly saw it in the solitude of his room, with the promise of unfiltered, one-on-one conversation, was the call that had ended in them swearing to never talk about it again. The memory of it rushes him regrettably.

He lets the phone ring in his hesitation.

Patches lifts her head to look at him, as though she can feel the jumpy change in his chest; in the entire house.

He picks up.

“Dream,” George says, “you’re not being a very good host.”

“Good morning to you too,” he greets calmly. He lays a palm on his chest, to soothe the nerves bundled there. George’s voice is amicable, readable—signs of heading for clear water. He’s missed the rain.

*I missed you*, his mind echoes George’s words back to him, *I still miss you*.

A sigh passes through the phone. “We want to watch a movie and can’t find the remote.”

Dream stretches out his back languidly, and rubs his eyes. “I sometimes leave it on the top of the fridge,” he muses. “Get a stool and check there.”

There’s a stiff pause. He smiles.

“All right,” George says, accompanied by faint shuffling on his end of the line.

Dream frowns in suspicion, and pulls the screen away from the side of his face. He strains his ears to listen to his creaky house. After a few seconds, he catches it—faint footsteps from below.

“Are you coming up the stairs?” he asks.

“No.” The footsteps grow louder, then Dream deciphers that it is two pairs, one much lighter and the other quite obvious after a week of hearing their stomping around.

“What the hell are you two doing?” he mumbles. A knock raps happily on his door not a moment later.

“Room service,” Sapnap’s voice muffles from the hall.

Dream rolls his eyes, and tips the phone towards his mouth. “Let me put some pants on.” He disconnects the call.

He swings his legs over the bed, slipping his feet from the cozy burrow of covers to the cold air. Lazy fingertips connect with a pair of sweats he’d discarded to the floor. Just as he’s seated on the edge of the bed, tugging them halfway up to his knees, the door swings open.

He doesn’t need to look up as he finishes getting dressed, shuffling the waistband against the cloth of his boxers. “You could’ve waited like, two more seconds, Sap.”

“But then I’d miss those sexy, sexy thighs.”

Dream huffs in amusement at his response, and glances up. Behind Sapnap is George, waiting in the hall, who gives him a light wave the second their eyes meet. His heart skips.

*Go back to sleep, George.*

*Why are you in Florida, George?*

*Are you asking me to kiss you, George?*

*Goodnight*, he'd said, lips on his forehead, exhales on his jaw. *Goodnight, George.*

“Is he acting like this because of the rain?” Dream asks, studying his face.

George nods. “More or less. He’s very sad.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here,” Sapnap says. He begins to walk forward into the room, and Dream shifts back to rest on his bed. “It’s raining on *Disney* day, Clay.”

He raises his eyebrows. “We can still go, you know. A little water never hurt anybody.”

“I know.” Sapnap sighs, as he flops down onto Dream’s blankets. “But we should wait for when it’s sunny—oh, hi Patches. Did you know she was in here?”

Dream shrugs.

“I think I agree with waiting for sun,” George says, as he leans against the doorframe. Only the tips of his toes seem to enter Dream’s room.

*That’s strange. He wasn’t so hesitant, before.*

“Your socks don’t match,” Dream observes.

George glances down at them, and sways on his feet idly. “They don’t.”

He looks away, then stretches a leg beneath the covers to kick Sapnap lightly. “So why are you here? To complain?”

“We need you to reach the top of the fridge,” Sapnap says from the covers, an arm stretched out to pet the purring kitty between them.

Dream stares at them. “That’s not going to make me get out of bed.” He tugs open the curtains, then falls back against his headboard with a satisfied huff. “Do you see this? This is lazy day weather.”

“Good weather for a movie,” George contests.

“What is it you guys want to watch?”

Sapnap points to George accusingly. “D’you know he’s never seen any Ghibli films?”

“I know,” Dream says, at the same moment George answers, “He knows.”

Dream smiles at him. George smiles back, softly.

“Great,” Sapnap continues, “so we’re in agreement, then. Downstairs?” George nods, and Sapnap turns towards Dream. “Downstairs?”

He groans. “The TV is so far away, and my bed is so warm,” he complains tiredly. “Can we think of something else?”

Sapnap sits up. “Well what do you suggest?”

Dream shrugs, then mindlessly gestures to his setup across the room. “My monitors are right there, I guess. Sometimes I watch stuff from bed.” He glances down at the space Sapnap takes up. “Should be enough room.”

Sapnap grins. “Are you asking us to cuddle, bro?”

Dream kicks him again. “I’m just saying we have better options. I could...use my VPN to stream it, probably, and then we’d all get what we want.”

Sapnap clears his throat contemplatively, then turns to George. The moment of silence that falls over Dream’s pale, rain-washed room is timid. He pinches the bridge of his nose, feels looming trickles of exhaustion, and sighs.

“I feel like,” he starts slowly, “we’ve been going nonstop since George got here. I think it’s been a lot, and I had a rough night’s sleep, so I just want to relax, today. I can leave bed if you’d like, but I really, really don’t want to.” He looks up, earnestly. “How do you guys feel?”

“I feel like you’ve had too much therapy,” Sapnap says.

“Are you trying to get kicked again?”

Sapnap raises his hands in defense. The air once again returns to tense quiet, as Dream waits, and listens to the rain. He passes over George; he’s wearing the same pajamas he had on the night before. Did he really not sleep much?

George’s eyes slowly lift off the carpet to gaze back, and he blinks. “...Should we bring extra blankets?”

Dream nods in relief.

“And pillows?” Sapnap asks.

He nods again, comforted by their easy-going smiles and wordless change of manner. They’re quick to spring to action and chatter about what they need. They dip out of his room while he’s in the middle of directing them, and he’s cut off by their bickering of the worst kind of snacks to spill on his bed.

He lets out a huff, and turns to the remaining company. Settling a gentle hand on Patches’ back, he murmurs, “You might have to move, sweetheart.”

She stays put. His bed is a decent size for a guy his height, but doubled with two more guests and an easily startled cat may be pushing the limits. Still, he holds her to his chest lovingly until Sapnap returns.

A brown, folded blanket is thrown at his face. Dream bats it away to protect Patches.

“Gimme,” Sapnap says.

Dream scowls, but slowly extends her out for Sapnap to hold. He begins to coo ‘*good-mornings*’ at her immediately while clambering into Dream’s bed.

“Things seem better today,” Sapnap notes offhandedly, settling against the wall beneath the window. He tugs lightly on the curtains, and tosses Dream a look.

“Things are better today,” Dream says quietly. *Sort of*, he thinks, so he adds, “Sort of.”

“How come?”

Dream leans to lightly scratch Patches’ head, and glances at the wariness on Sapnap’s face. “It’s alright, Sapnap,” he says carefully. “You can relax. It’s...it’s not yours, okay?” He sinks back away from him. “It’s mine, and his.”

“Oh,” Sapnap says. He sounds relieved. “Okay.”

Before Dream can comment further, George enters with a large armful of pillows and blankets that nearly swallow him whole. It’s considerably more than Sapnap had bothered to grab.

“I have to ask, once again,” George says, dumping the pile before them. “*Why* is it so cold in this house?”

Dream reaches to grasp at a new quilt. “Keeps my brain sharp, I dunno.”

George stands at the foot of his bed, watching them spread out and rearrange the added comfort. Pillows are slotted behind their backs, thin blankets unfolded, far more than necessary but Dream appreciates the effort.

“Where’d you get half of these?” Sapnap questions.

“Um, the linen closet by the washroom.” George looks at them hesitantly. “Should I not have?”

“You’re fine,” Dream says, then pauses. “Well? You want us to pat the space so you know where to sit, George?”

Sapnap gestures to the blankets between them enthusiastically. “C’mere Gogy! C’m’mon!”

Dream laughs, mimicking, “It’s an easy jump, you can make it!”

“I will go downstairs and watch by myself,” George says flatly. Their laughter continues as they pat the bed, and he turns to go.

“Hey, hey,” Dream says quickly, bending forward to grasp his elbow. “I don’t think so.”

George’s wide eyes shoot back to stare at him, and he shakes his head in warning. “Don’t,” he says gravely, “*don’t*—”

Dream grins, and pulls him backwards onto the bed with ease. George falls between him and Sapnap on a mound of fluffy blankets, fraying his hair, as a light huff escapes his lungs upon landing.

He peers up at Dream stubbornly through the staticky, brunet mess. “You happy, now?”

Dream’s fingers are slow to unwrap from his arm. He realizes, faintly, he’d tugged George onto his bed, and now George’s back is on his mattress, and George’s dark eyes are gazing up at him softly, as the sound of rain slowly closes in around them.

“Very,” he says.

“Now who’s gonna put the stuff on the computer?” Sapnap asks, helpfully.

Dream’s eyes jump to his setup, then to Sapnap, who shares a look in the brief beat of silence.

Immediately, they push George away again.

“Atta boy, there you go,” Dream encourages.

Sapnap chuckles, insincerely. “Sorry.”

“What happened to me being privileged as a guest?” George grumbles, as sock-covered feet push on his back until he’s standing off the bed.

“That only lasts for two business days,” Dream says. As George approaches his setup that he’d left running, he directs, “You should be able to just—” George’s quick fingers fly over his keyboard, and the dark monitors blink to his desktop backgrounds. “Did you just guess my *computer* passcode? I know for a fact I didn’t give you that one.”

George straightens up, and looks back at him. “How is your memory this bad? I literally was on call when I told you what to set it as.”

It takes Dream a moment, but then he remembers. “Oh god, you’re right.”

“You seriously never changed it?” George asks, amused.

“Oh wait, wait,” Sapnap says, laughing lightly. “Is it still the—”

“Pissbaby ninety-seven,” George recites. He and Sapnap delve into a fit of soft giggles, while Dream rolls his eyes.

“I don’t even think about it, it’s just muscle memory,” he defends. “Plus, if I remember correctly, that was *your* passcode before it was mine, George.”

George stops laughing immediately. “Shut up.”

“You had matching passwords?” Sapnap forces out.

They’re quick to turn on Sapnap when given the opportunity, and between Dream’s haphazard directions of George setting up the movie, the banter makes him feel a bit better. He finally slides out of bed, and excuses himself to the restroom.

The smell of rain washes in from the window screen. He doesn’t bother to turn on the light, finding comfort in the cold blues and whites that cover himself and the mirror. He eyes the outside storm; it seems calm, and nourishing, a heavy fall that is sure to leave large puddles on the road and dark mud lapping the back patio.

He breathes it in. He brushes his teeth, spits into the sink, idly ruffles his hair—and breathes it out.

Once back in his room, he hears Sapnap saying, “—Should be good? Check the sound.”

Faint noises float through his speakers. George is standing at his setup still, crouching as his eyes flit over the screens.

“Is it working?” Dream asks.

George frowns at the monitors. “Yeah, but it’s still pretty quiet.”

“Let me see.” Dream takes a step closer, and mindlessly rests a hand on George’s lower back as he politely moves him out of the way. “Oh, it’s outputting in the wrong place. Deselect the first option and go for the second.”

He’s not aware of his own touch, the shift of George’s spine beneath his light palm, until George murmurs, “This one?”

The sound begins to play.

“Yeah.” Dream glances back to Sapnap, who is candidly staring right at the hand lingering on George’s back.

His eyes lift to Dream with a bright, happy question in the raise of his dark brows.

Dream glares back. “Can you hear it alright?” he asks, words firm and pointedly spaced to make him stop beaming like that.

“Loud and clear,” Sapnap says.

Dream carefully removes his fingers and pushes his gaming chair out of the way. “So which one did you pick?”

George clicks the full screen option, and his idle monitors flick into the swirling screensaver. The cartoon of a young child atop a jellyfish, drifting in the ocean, appears with delight. Dream smiles fondly at the sight of her reddish hair.

“Oh, good,” he says. “This one is—”

“Perfect for rainy days,” George finishes. He gives Dream a quiet glance, and somehow, it feels like his hand is still on his back. “I remember.”

His tired, loving heart glows in the silence of that glance and the weight of that reminder. It’s hard to believe sometimes when looking at George just how much of his life has been tangled up with him, even though it hasn’t been long. Even though it could’ve been yesterday when he first saw George’s username on his blocky, pixelated screen.

As they resettle to watch the film, Dream feels that he’s going to love the rain, and the story, and the feel of reclining back in his bed with his best friends nearby even more than he thought he would before.

The movie starts, familiar scenes and bright colors cross his screen. Breathing oceans and sea life and a house on a hill; he wishes he could make it his own. Characters appear with strange magic, and the three are quick to make pointed ‘*that’s you*’s or ‘*that’s us*’s at whatever amusing creatures they see. George’s thin arms are pressed between Dream and Sapnap, his knees occasionally nudge theirs while adjusting blankets, but the space doesn’t feel crowded. It’s nice to be so close, though it does tire Dream to keep glancing to his right.

Between comforters, drumming rainfall, and Patches’ purring, the movie continues with matching ease. Dream leans further into the pillows.

He yawns. After a moment, he yawns again.

George glances at him. “You gonna sleep?” he asks, amused.

“No,” Dream defends poorly.

Blankets warm up to his chest; he slips down deeper into their embrace. He blinks at the comforting animations as musing comments are made to his right. The sight of steaming drinks, and noodles with ham, make his eyes grow heavy.

As his back sinks into the mattress, his mind slowly drifts up and away from the plot all together. A sigh escapes his lips.

He can feel Sapnap and George looking at him, with light snickers.

“Shuddup,” he mutters, before finally giving in and closing his eyes for good.

He falls asleep, around noon on the day he should be scared half to death on a rollercoaster, feeling safer than he has for a long, long time.

-

Dream stirs back into consciousness twice; once while the low hum of the movie is still playing through the room, and once when all noise is gone.

His face shifts against the pillows beneath him, relaxed exhales gliding from his nose over his mouth and soft cotton. Eyes still shut, he leans into the feeling of something dragging over his scalp, massaging and assuaging his sleepiness.

He comes to gradually. After a moment, he realizes fingers are soothing him to the peaceful inbetween. They graze through his hair, dipping into locks, to draw light circles and repeat again. Cozied in darkness, he focuses on their gentle rhythm.

Warmth slips down his spine. Comforted, like a content child, he lets the light petting continue with closed eyes. Over the low hum of the movie, he gains the awareness that Sapnap and George are talking.

“—Nightmare,” George’s faraway voice says. More mumbling ensues. “...Alright, though.”

The fingertips in his hair drag down to the base of his neck, combing gently. Nails scratch through blondish locks, spreading light tingles over his scalp. He gets lost in the softness of their caressing.

“I mean I’m sure...and then...” Sapnap’s reply is hard to catch, and Dream’s half-mind strains to follow along. “—If that makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

Dream adjusts his head slightly to try and hear better, and the touch on his scalp quickly recedes. He forces his face to not frown at the loss, keeping his features still. After a silent period of breathing calm and even, he feels the fingers return. They rake tentatively through his hair, and twirl every so often.

“—had a good cry,” George is whispering, softly. “I mean, it hurt, and it sucked, but it was a good one.”

“Those are always nice, in a weird way,” Sapnap says.

George hums, then says something Dream can’t hear. Whether their conversation is caught in silence, or abandoned for observation of the colorful film that flashes faintly beyond Dream’s eyelids, he doesn’t know.

Sapnap's voice, low and stern, falls quietly. "—Lucky he's so kind, George."

"I know."

Dream's mind is slowly lowered back to peaceful mush. The hand in his hair slows, but doesn't leave, and he finds a comforting peace in its presence. Words slip by him as he fades once more.

"You know that..." Sapnap says, the middles all lost to his sleepiness. "—With you, and he's not going to stop."

Too quiet to remember, he hears George say, "Neither will I."

He doesn't dream the second time he sleeps, either. Only darkness, and a hint of murmured voices, and the feel of a warm palm pulling away from his skull.

It is still raining when he wakes. He's alone in his room, the monitors are blank, and the door to the hall is yawning wide open. All the extra blankets have been neatly folded on his bed, and Patches is nowhere in sight. He feels a pang once he realizes he missed most of the movie.

He's sluggish when he sways to his feet. He smacks his tongue slowly at the feel of its weighted dryness, and opens the low mini-fridge across the room, to see an array of empty glass bottles.

A warm sigh escapes him at the reminder. He had to guzzle water from the kitchen sink the night before precisely because he forgot to refill his supply.

Noisily clacking the bottles together in his hands, Dream makes his way downstairs. Again, George and Sapnap are nowhere in sight once he reaches the cold floor. Late afternoon looks the same as morning had been, perhaps with a deeper shade of gray.

Dream busies himself with refilling a few bottles, storing them in the kitchen fridge, frowning at residue left inside the base of others. He hesitantly approaches the sink, and cleans the glass with water gliding over sudsy fingers.

He hears faint laughter, and lifts his eyes towards the backyard. In the open jacuzzi he can scarcely view from the sliding window, a head of dark hair peeks out of the side.

*Oh.*

He tugs the glass open, and faint mist floats through the screen. "Hello?"

Sapnap glances over his shoulder, squinting, until he sees the window and smiles. "Goodmorning! It's fine if we use this in the rain, right?"

*We, he thinks, even though he can't see George from the limited kitchen view. So they're both out there.*

Dream gives him a thumbs up, and Sapnap returns it. It's been a while since anyone has used it besides him, and he wonders if they'd found the right beach towels before getting in.

His hands stall when he shuts off the faucet. *Wait.*

"You coming?" Sapnap asks from the yard.

*In my hot tub, in a swimsuit.* His mind short circuits. *George.*

"Uh—I'll be out in a second," he calls, hoping his voice doesn't fracture on delivery. He slides the

window shut with a bang.

*Oh god.*

His mind can't seem to conjure anything else as he hurries back to his room, changes into board shorts, and briefly fusses over himself in the mirror. He's practically skipping when he returns back downstairs with towels he'd grabbed from the hall.

He takes in a calming breath, and slides open the backdoor. The drizzle outside is light, falling in spatters in warm air, but the drops themselves feel cold as he steps out from beneath the overhang. Humid green and marshy browns stand out as he swipes his eyes over the yard.

He makes his way to the hot tub, stepping on stone slats and avoiding muddy puddles. Flowers his sisters had planted wilt beautifully beneath weighted raindrops.

“Ayo,” Sapnap greets. “Oh cool, I was wondering where you kept those.”

Dream lowers the towels to rest on the rising steps, the wood drenched dark with hours of downpour.

“How is it?” Dream asks, fixed on the light blue water. He dips his hand in, and his fingertips immediately jump.

“Eh.”

“It’s nice,” George answers, and Dream finally lets himself look at him. His smile is soft like his voice, seemingly at ease with damp hair resting against his forehead, and drops of rainwater on his bare skin.

Dream’s chest grows tight. He doesn’t let himself linger, and is quick to glance away.

“We couldn’t figure out how to turn the jets on,” Sapnap says dejectedly.

“Oh.” Dream frowns, stepping up onto the platform to crouch by the controls. He absently tugs off his shirt, and wipes down the buttons. “Shit, these are so annoying.” After a moment of pressing, a light beep chimes, and bubbles break the surface. “Ah. There we go.”

“Bless,” Sapnap says, relaxing neck-deep with his back towards Dream.

Dream surveys the flowing jets, then follows the pull of George’s stare on him. His wide eyes flit up to Dream’s face slowly, then drop away at the realization of being recognized.

A subtle pink rests on George’s cheeks that definitely wasn’t there before.

*Oh god.* Dream’s heart pounds as he slowly moves next to Sapnap, and lowers himself into the frothy water. *Oh god, oh god, oh god.*

If it’s easy to bait away in the lonely warmth of his showers, it should be fine to dismiss here, with heat stinging his skin and a grey sky hanging above them. Water licks up to his chest as he sinks into the deepest corner of the tub. The bubbly surface rises, and spills over the edges slightly to splash the concrete slab below.

“Your legs are so annoying,” Sapnap grumbles, as Dream stretches out into the middle.

“Sorry,” he says, absently nudging calves and ankles beneath the swirling foam. He hooks his arms over the edge, careful to keep his fingertips dangling close to himself in the water. “Have you been

out here for long?"

Bubbles slip and glide over his torso. Raindrops disappear in the turbulent surface.

"About fifteen minutes, or so," George says, and he glances to his left.

Slim collarbones rising from glimmering water, a pale throat misted by rain. His hair is darkened by the storm, eyes enough to match, hanging at the corner of Dream's vision until he blinks sharply. Dream's attention dances back to palm trees; the leaves glistening beneath heavy clouds.

"You missed the movie," Sapnap notes.

Dream looks at him. "I know, sorry 'bout that. I feel bad for sleeping the entire day away."

Sapnap waves a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. We got our Ghibli and you got some rest." His voice is easy, leaves no room for doubt, and it helps Dream ease further into the tub.

"It was a really cute film," George says. "I liked it."

A warm smile passes over Dream's face. "Good, that's good. We'll have to watch some more of them, then."

"Anyway." Sapnap clears his throat, and turns towards George in a quick slide to what seems like a previous conversation. "I'd only try it if you made it from scratch."

George pulls a face. "You're acting like it's so complicated."

"It *seems* complicated," Sapnap insists. "'Honey-milk?' Sure."

Dream cups and pours bubbles into the tub as they talk. He idly reaches to switch on the low, illuminating lights on the floor of the jacuzzi and interior walls. Red gleams from the water on his chest, then fades to orange, then green. He looks to his left, again. George is pretty in green.

"You're abominable," George says flatly.

"I'm not a snowman."

"What?" George's voice is sharp, and Dream glances up to Sapnap's face. He knows too well the twinge in tone that means they are, at last, getting annoyed with each other.

"I'm not," Sapnap repeats, "a snowman."

"Okay!" Dream sits up. "Did you guys think of any plans for later? Post-hot tub?"

A pause settles, where they simmer in a silence filled with hissing jets. Steam floats from the surface into the humid air; Dream can feel it in his nose on every inhale.

"George was thinking about streaming," Sapnap says finally.

"From my setup like you did?" Dream asks, and he nods. "Probably for the best. They've been hounding us for content."

"Certainly hope they don't expect a facecam," George mutters.

Dream smiles. "Something wrong with my face, George?"

He gets a huff in return, and nothing more. George doesn't seem to be looking at him either.

"They died at the thing I tweeted earlier," Sapnap says, and George laughs immediately.

"Oh no." Dream worries his wet fingertips on the side of his cheek, pressing beneath bone. "What was it?"

"You making out with your pillow."

His jaw falls open. "*Dude.*"

"Don't listen to him. It was actually just you all—" George mimics him sleeping, hands pressed to his cheek. "Y'know. Napping next to Patches. We made sure your face wasn't in it, though."

"Good," Dream mutters in relief as they laugh at him. "So you stole my hair reveal?"

"Sorta."

He can only imagine what he'd looked like, half buried in mounds of blankets and pillows, only his shoulders and back of his head in view. Maybe it would've been nice if someone else captured his face, and presented it for the world to see. Then he'd be free from the responsibility—the impossibility—of doing it. Even staring at a blatant reflection, he can't reach his own face and remove the mask.

His jaw tightens at the thought of the nightmare.

Sapnap nudges him. "You look weird. Did that actually bother you?"

He quickly clears his head, and lets his expression relax. "No, no, I'm fine." His voice is low enough to match the way he'd spoken of the dream in the kitchen, last night.

George's eyes meet his quickly enough to be mistaken for worry. Strong, and dark, his gaze lingers when Dream fails to let it hold.

"If you want to see it I can get my phone," George offers.

"See what?"

"The tweet."

Dream tips his head dismissively. "I can look at it later."

He trusts Sapnap enough, after laying out some guidelines his first week here of what can and can't be posted. He also has ammunition from ajar bathroom doors and unfortunate timing, if push comes to shove. Just in case.

George rises and begins to move across the hot tub anyway.

"George, don't. I told you not to get your—" Dream leans back quickly as he draws closer.

"Calm down, I'm just going to the toilet." He steps on the seat between Sapnap and Dream, and carefully gets out. Water races down the slope of his bare spine, trickling over soaked shorts, and drops holes in the jacuzzi foam below. "Crybaby."

Dream lets his eyes slide recklessly, until George's pale skin and lean arms disappear beneath a colorful towel.

He gets a faceful of water as George walks away. “*God*—what the—” His spluttering is cut off by another wave stinging his nose. He shoves a cupped palm Sapnap’s way in retaliation. “What the hell? Screw you.”

“I don’t wanna see that,” Sapnap whispers, shrill.

Dream sends a smack of chlorinated wash to him again. “See *what*? ”

“Don’t *check him out* in front of me, you fucking moron.”

“I wasn’t—” His wide eyes snap up to Sapnap, who wipes the water from his cheeks like it has the plague. “*Was I?*”

Sapnap groans. “Oh my god. I hate you, I really hate you. I will go home early—”

“*Sapnap.*”

“He didn’t notice! He didn’t notice,” he rushes, and Dream visibly relaxes. “You’re fine, take a breath, count to ten, or whatever.” He sends another light splash to assault Dream’s nose.

Dream glares at him, heart still pounding, and sneezes.

“Good,” Sapnap says, triumphantly. He sneezes again. “Okay I get it, you can shut up now.”

“Sorry,” Dream forces out nasally, and clears his throat. “I’m sensitive to chlorine.”

“Of course you are.”

They briefly pause in the dripping of tub water from already damp hair, and the wind picks up. Speckles of rain bring chills to Dream’s shoulders, and he slowly drops his arms in. Magenta lights dance between them.

“So,” Sapnap says. “You feeling up for a stream, later?”

A sigh escapes him. “Yeah. It’ll be nice to share this with them.” He sinks until his neck is gently lapped by gurgling water. “But honestly...sometimes I don’t want to. They pick up on the smallest stuff, you know? Down to the changes in my voice and—” He frowns. “I don’t know.”

“It’s like it hits too close to home,” Sapnap muses.

“Yeah, that’s a good way to put it.”

After a moment, Sapnap asks, “Did I tell you the other day I saw a drawing that looked exactly like you?”

Dream grins. “No, seriously?”

“Yeah, if I remember to, I’ll send it later.”

“Crazy,” he says.

“Crazy,” Sapnap agrees. He pulls his hands from the water, and studies them. “Jesus, I’m getting all pruney.” He splays his hands out to show Dream his wrinkled fingertips.

“Gross. Have you really been in here that long?”

Sapnap wipes his palms together. “Yeah. George took his time joining me.”

“What?” Dream sits up, slowly, the top of his chest rising above the surface and resting on the cool plastic behind. “What was he doing?”

Sapnap shrugs. “Cleaning, I think. I’m surprised he didn’t wake you up. Seemed like he wanted to.”

It’s embarrassing to consider how he’d probably looked, snoring and drooling on his pillows. His face warms at the thought of George sticking around, folding blankets on the bed; carefully drawing the blinds. He imagines George’s hand, cautiously wrapping over his shoulder despite Sapnap’s warnings, and nudging him lightly to see if he’ll stir.

It’s far too domestic. He ducks his head, and rapidly studies the moving water.

“Alright,” Sapnap says, sitting up straight. “I’m getting a headache.”

Dream peers up at him as he clammers out. “Oh, hey, could you fix up some pasta while you’re in there? Pretty please?”

Beyond a face-full of a towel, Sapnap muffles, “What? Why?”

“Because I’m hungry and you love me,” he tries.

Sapnap pulls down the fuzzy cloth, and stares at him.

“Because I’m hungry,” Dream attempts again, “and I know you’re gonna join a call with someone who has a good meat sauce recipe.” He smiles, sickly sweet.

The towel bunched at Sapnap’s chest is tugged over his head, a multicolored cape to combat the rain. He scowls at Dream from beneath it, and mutters, “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you!” he calls, as Sapnap leaves him behind in the jacuzzi with an obscene parting gesture.

He relaxes back into solitude happily at the thought of buttered noodles and steaming sauce. Water rushes over his skin from the steady stream of jets, unwinding tension left in his gut and shoulders. Tiny bubbles cling to his knees below the surface.

It must be calm below, free from the darkening sky, and instead submerged in neon colors. Dream glances around his empty yard, then begins to sink down slowly.

His eyes screw shut as water rises over his lips, and nose, until he’s submerged his entire head beneath the foam. The drowning roar of the jets fills his ears immediately. Heat stings his nostrils and flushes over his cheekbones.

He leans into the weightlessness, hair floating amidst crossing purples and blues.

*I could stay for a while*, he thinks. *Stay, stay, stay.*

Dizziness begins to grow in his lungs, and he can feel the chlorine seeping damage to his sinuses. A sharp tap raps on top of his skull.

He breaches the surface immediately, sitting up and wiping his eyes.

“What are you doing?” George’s voice asks him, and as Dream blinks droplets away, he sees him slowly sitting on the edge of the hot tub. He’s only slightly unreadable, features drawn together in a

light frown.

Dream's face still buzzes from where the bubbles had grazed him. He reaches to shut off the jets, and the water slowly calms down with a hiss. "You've never done that before?"

George raises his eyebrows. "Tried to drown?"

"That's not what I—" He pauses once he identifies the slight smirk on George's face. "Okay. Stop making fun of me."

George leans off of the exterior, away from Dream. "Where's Sap?"

*Making pasta, hopefully.* "He tapped out."

"Ah," George says.

Dream pushes his wet hair off of his forehead. He tries not to think about the details of their attire, or their new seclusion, and instead squeezes droplets from his scalp.

A breeze shifts over them, and George shivers slightly.

"You can get back in, you know," Dream says casually.

"I know."

A beat passes. He stares at George, while George stares at the water. "What's the hesitation for?"

"My hands and feet are freezing," George mutters. "It's gonna burn so bad when I get back in."

Dream rolls his eyes. "And I'm the crybaby. They can't be *that* bad." He immediately jumps at the feel of ice cold knuckles pressing to his jaw. "Oh my—you—you feel like a dead person." Once it leaves, his cheek burns where the touch had been. "God, okay. I can see why you're worried."

George seems satisfied at that. "Told you."

Dream politely relocates himself to the other corner of the tub, and George carefully gets back in. He's thoroughly amused by the series of dramatic winces that cross his face.

Eventually, George relaxes with a light sigh, and Dream has to look away. Although being alone with him feels better after last night, he isn't sure how to talk without being noticed. Darkness creeps above them, the glowing lights continue to shine beneath unobstructed water.

He brushes a few sudden, large raindrops off his shoulder, and glances at the sky.

"Did it sound like a storm?" George asks suddenly.

He glances back down. "Did what?"

"The jets, under the water," he clarifies. "Did it sound like thunder?"

Dream pauses, then holds a hand over a steady geyser on the surface, feeling it push against his palm. "Yeah, I guess you could say that." He isn't sure how to feel about the expression he keeps seeing on George's face, one of study, or learning, or searching. "Why?"

"It just...reminds me of covering your ears under the shower stream, and listening to it. Sounds a lot like thunder and rain."

Dream presses his lips together in a light smile. “I used to do that as a kid all the time.”

“Me too.” A comfortable silence settles, until George muses, “It was heavier before you woke up. I think I saw lightning, too.”

Dream leans his head back to chase after the spots of light marbled in the moving clouds. “That’s a shame. I would’ve liked to see it.” He continues to look up, and murmurs, “You...should’ve used your camera for me.”

He hasn’t been able to stop thinking about it. Knowing that it’s held somewhere in George’s room upstairs, with a gallery full of photos from his world, carves him with endless curiosity. He asked what George takes pictures of, and watched him pause, lift his eyes carefully, and say; *Things that matter.*

George huffs. “No way. Sapnap doesn’t know about that.”

Dream’s brows knit together. “How come?”

“Are you kidding?” The amused disbelief in George’s voice makes him tip his head back down. “He’d roast the shit out of me.”

Dream tsks. “No he wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I promise you,” George insists, laughing lightly, “I’m very careful about what I do and don’t tell him. He definitely would.”

Rain patters lightly on Dream’s skull, solace from the hot steam that rises off his upper body. “Were you...worried I would?” he asks.

“Of course not,” George says easily. His fingertips glide lightly on the surface, creating small swirls and bubbles. “You’re you.”

Dream carefully follows the motion of his hands, the idle grace of slender bone, wrists saturated blue from the changing lights below. His heart begins to pound, and he swears if the drizzle disappeared, George would be able to hear it.

“Were you touching my hair earlier?” he asks quietly.

George’s startled eyes jump to meet him. From the opposite corner of the too wide tub, Dream expects him to flinch or look away. His lips part, the seconds grow, but his gaze doesn’t leave.

“A little,” George says.

A faint exhale escapes Dream. He hadn’t imagined it after all; George’s gentle touch, fingers drifting over his scalp, swaying him in and out of a sleepy daze. Softly, he asks, “Why?”

“You...you had this look on your face when you were sleeping. Like you were hurt,” George explains, and his voice sounds far away. “I was worried you might be having a bad dream again, or something.” His hands trail in the water before him. “It went away when I started, so I just...kept.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Dream lightly drags his fingers through his wet hair, elbow lifting from the water, and George watches him. “It felt...nice,” he confesses. “I’ve always found it really peaceful when people play

with my hair. I don't know why."

"Something about trust, probably," George offers.

Dream looks at him. "Yeah."

He briefly studies George's hair, how the dark ends are curling slightly from the moisture. It's a funny thing to trust someone with, a head in their hands, vulnerable to their pain or benevolence.

*I've thought about his hair before*, he considers, then bites the inside of his cheek. *Not now, not now.*

"Did you hear what we were talking about?" George asks timidly.

"Not really. Just voices." Dream pauses. "Why? What were you talking about?" He's immediately confused by the guilt that assumes George's features; eyes falling away, lips drawing thin.

"Last night, and stuff."

*Oh.*

George glances at him, then begins to rush, "It's just that he kept asking so I figured—"

"It's uh, it's alright." Dream clears his throat uneasily. "It's not like it was a secret, or anything."

George nods; they fall silent. The heavy weight of their gaze begs to differ. *Why does it feel like one?*

"Look, about that," Dream says, slowly. "I'm not the best at picking up on these things, so please correct me, but I...I feel like it's safe to assume stuff is okay, today. After last night." Dream studies his face, carefully. "I hope I didn't scare you."

"Oh, you did," George says bluntly.

Dream's stomach flips with unease. "Shit. Um, I'm really sorry I—"

"No, no, Dream, it's a good thing," George corrects quickly. "Sorry, I should've explained—"

"How is that a good thing?" he asks, winded. He can feel his pulse fluttering fearfully on his throat.

George lets out a huff, and sinks back into the corner of the tub. "Sometimes I need to be scared. It knocks me out of my own head, a bit."

Dream leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Cold air graces his collarbones as the rest of him glows turquoise in the water. "I get that," he says firmly, "I get that, I do. But it's happened before where I scare you, and—and everything changes."

George looks up at him. Refracted shreds of light dance under his chin and cheekbones. "Are you talking about the..." He doesn't finish. *The text.*

Dream mutters out a quiet, 'yeah.' In the tense pause that follows, the jacuzzi feels like it's losing heat. He wishes for rain, more rain, enough to slip off his face and spatter the surface of the tub and force him to reach for something else for warmth.

"I...have something to say about that, if you want to hear it," George speaks up, quietly.

Dream's face hardens. "I'm not really in the mood to get told off, again."

"No, it's not that I—" George's sincere tone retreats, and he's back to avoiding Dream's gaze and tracing the water. "Right. You're right. Not a good day for it, nevermind."

*Shit.* Dream's eyes flutter shut with immediate regret, so he doesn't have to see the guarded look that undoubtedly raises across George's face. *He was just about to talk to me.*

He hopes he doesn't further regret when he rubs at his temples, and says, "Actually. Just, lay it on me."

"...Are you sure?"

Dream almost smiles at the timidity in his voice. "I can take it," he assures, eyeing George with a sigh. "I'm sure."

"Okay. If you're sure," George says. His gaze cuts to Dream briefly, then darts away. "I know this is stupid. Can you not look at me?"

"You want me to...look away?" Dream questions, and George gives him a nervous nod.

He wants to know if George's eyes are often closed when they're on the phone together, if he asks this of anyone when he wants to speak, or if it's unique to them only—like most things.

Instead, he says, "Okay." He tips his head back against the cushion dramatically, and squints up at the light raindrops falling from the sky. "Tell me again why you hate me, George."

He's immediately scolded. "Stop that, you know I don't."

Dream focuses on the droplets illuminated faintly by the faraway patio lights. Mist collects on his skin, and he wonders if it's all in his head, or if George's voice has always been softer in the rain. "I know," he says quietly. "Sometimes I think it'd be easier if you did."

"That's never going to happen." George's sternness fades, and he draws in a light breath. They both seem to brace themselves for impact, when he says, "You know I...I got that text when I was in the car, with my family."

Dream exhales, but says nothing. Guilt coats him with familiarity.

"I didn't know how to process it. As I reread it over the past few weeks, the rest of our summer, I think...I wasn't able to understand it at the time. Or understand you." His voice is slow, each word seemingly chosen with care. "It feels wrong to keep talking about old things that we've already—" George cuts himself off unexpectedly, with a sigh. "The most recent time I reread it was probably, I don't know, the day before I came here."

"So that's why you brought it up," Dream says, face on fire. He'd meant it as a question, but it comes out too low to be lifted.

"I guess it was still on my mind," George admits. "I didn't realize I was still angry that...that you'd wanted to throw everything away, just because we couldn't have this."

*This.* Dream's eyes widen. His ears ring, and his heart pounds. *This, this, this.*

He wants to celebrate the acknowledgement of such a simple word, but knows his hope is rash, and short-sighted. George said it so quietly, tacked it on like he knew it'd have meaning, and couldn't

give it more than a soft breath.

George's voice grows low. "I felt like less of a person, Dream."

His throat tightens. "George—"

"Just, listen," he says; quick, but not cruel. "That wasn't because of you. *I* made myself less of a person. I...I do that, a lot. Let people make me small, and sometimes they don't even know that it's happening." He hears the smile that settles in George's words, and knows it is sad. "You didn't know. You never did, and that's not your fault."

Dream tilts his head back down, but keeps his vision closed in darkness. The pain in his chest slowly takes his breath away. "I wasn't..." he trails off shakily. His brows slowly draw together. "I wasn't going to toss it all away. As much as I thought I wanted to, I didn't have it in me."

*Believe me*, he wants to say. *Please, believe me.*

"I'm learning that, now," George replies softly. Dream's eyes slowly open; George is already looking at him. "My bad habit might be worse than we thought."

Dream's heart yearns as he searches the gentle sorrow on George's face. Rain on his hair, the downward slope of his shoulders, light ripples in the water between them. No one else gets to see this side of him, do they?

"Underestimating me?" Dream teases, lightly.

"Misunderstanding you," George corrects. His words are warm, but rest on the curve of his mouth with meaning. "You know...I'm still surprised by how much you've changed, Clay. I'm really, really proud of you."

Dream's face melts into an overwhelming blush. His brows raise and draw together, eyes wide and soft as he gazes at George candidly. "You...are?"

The longer their contact holds, the more the heat in him spreads from his cheeks to his neck to his chest. *Oh, he thinks, god.*

"Of course I am," George says gently. He huffs. "It...it kind of reminds me of how you were six years ago. So cautious before you really knew me."

He's heard those words leave George's mouth in this manner before, 'six years,' like a definitive timestamp that implies a 'before' and an 'after.' Six years since the first time they exchanged contacts, six years since Dream heard his voice for the first time; six years since his life changed for good with George finally in it.

"Because you're *intimidating*," Dream answers honestly.

George stares at him. "You're like, a foot taller than me. And annoyingly nice, and way too perceptive, and way too smart." His stare eases into a gaze unexpectedly, and Dream's breath locks in his chest. "You...you used to message me constantly, you know? All the time."

All the time, until terribly hot weather and terribly warm thoughts, and radio silence that has been good for them, but hurts. Hearing George's light laughter in a call and knowing he wasn't the one to have caused it, seeing him chat on other's streams and avoiding game nights entirely. Messaging him about stupid things, meaningless things, just to appreciate the read receipts that showed he is still real, still watching.

*This is going to hurt, isn't it?*

*It has*, he wants to tell his former self. *It does. It will.*

His voice is hollow. "I just wanted to be close to you, George. That's all I've ever wanted."

George's expression becomes complicated; unreadable. Yet when he speaks, Dream can hear the exhaustion, lack of sleep, and hatred of their distance. "I'm tired of this, Dream. I really am. Even when we weren't talking, that felt like fighting, too."

He doesn't know what to do, or feel, or say—so he gives George a small smile. "I like fighting with you."

George lets out a long exhale. "Oh, I know you do."

Dream's expression briefly lifts into a grin. A contemplative pause passes over them, where George's eyes tip up to the dark sky, and Dream's trace where his dark brows give way to curved lashes.

"There has to be something about this weather," George muses suddenly.

"Hm?"

"It always makes me—" He glances back at Dream, and pauses. "Feel more like myself, I guess." He lingers a moment longer, before the thoughtfulness in his manner is quickly exchanged for panic. "God, okay, I just said a lot of things and am now beginning to realize that. Could you like, I don't know, change the subject or say something—"

Dream laughs immediately, and it swiftly eases any of their remaining discomfort. "Aww," he says, "Georgie." The eye roll he receives makes him sweeten his voice even more. "George, George, thank you so much for talking to me, I really appreciate it—"

Water sloshes against the sides as Dream moves to sit by him, and George leans away. "Stop. Stop it."

"You have such a way with words when you're all *gooey*," Dream gushes, stretching an arm over the side and to pull him close. "So poetic and heartfelt, my *hero*—"

The base of George's palms bat at his bare chest defensively. "I will—" George laughs, fighting for breath and space. "Leave your soggy arse out here if you don't—"

Dream blocks his attack in an easy grasp, and their words suddenly fall short. His fingers slowly leave George's knuckles, as their hands fall back into the surface, centimeters away in tepid water.

"Really," Dream says, earnest and warm. "You have no idea how much of a relief it is to—to talk to you again. To have you here. I know I can be..." He glances down at the distance he'd somehow closed between them, then back up. "A lot. And I know it's not easy. But I'm glad to see you're trying."

His shoulder and forearm are warm where they rest against George's upper back. When he exhales, the proximity makes George's dark lashes shudder. It reminds him of their closeness in the kitchen; the feel of his jaw tipping up.

Breathlessly, Dream murmurs, "Thank you for trying."

“It’s the least I can do,” George whispers.

Even though it’s only a drizzle, even though it’s hardly collecting on their hair and rolling down their skin, Dream says, “You look so at home in the rain.”

“Really?”

He can feel where George’s thigh presses into his own, where their calves brush in stagnant water. He nods, unable to form words at the size of George’s eyes as they gaze up at him.

“So do you,” George says. Then, he squints in overt analysis. “Minus the hair.”

A breath of fake offense leaves Dream’s chest. “What’s wrong with my hair?” He reaches up to push at his damp locks, probably leaving them worse off and poking out at odd angles.

George laughs gently. “It looks kind of funny, like that,” he says apologetically, but his eyes are bright.

“Like this?” Dream runs both hands through his hair, leaving it a messy scramble, just to hear George laugh again. He returns to rest an arm on the edge around George, and neither of them move to take it away.

“Yeah. Exactly.” George pauses, sweeping over his hairline, then continues to giggle. His shoulder lightly bumps Dream’s chest.

Dream raises his eyebrows. “You really think it’s that funny?” He only gets a nod in return; George’s smile squeezing his eyes in quiet laughs. “Okay, then.”

He cups a palm below the surface, and quickly dumps it over George’s head. Water splats on his nearly dried hair, flattening it against his skull as it races over his face. Dream laughs at the way his shoulders bunch up defensively because of it.

“Much better,” he says gleefully. “You look like Patches after a bath.”

George blows out of his mouth, and drops of water spray across Dream’s face. “You suck. Fix it.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” Dream reaches up, and pushes the wet hair off of George’s forehead. “You’re lucky I’m good at this, just have to...” The backs of his fingernails dip into his hairline, and rake over his scalp gratuitously. Slick hair rises with a bold, dark style that he’s never seen on George before. His breath catches, and his hand lingers, combing gently with restraint.

He clears his throat. “There,” he says, weakly.

“Does it look stupid?” George asks. His voice sounds different.

Dream’s hand brushes the hair behind his ear, and withdraws. The back of his knuckles accidentally brush George’s neck.

“Do you want me to tell you the truth?” he questions.

If there is any danger in the low hint to his voice, George notices it, and doesn’t say a word. “Sure,” he breathes.

Dream takes it in, the pushed-up frenzy of his incredibly soft hair, the faint glow on his cheekbones and dark contrast of his eyes. Dream’s heart beats heavily in his ribcage, he could be so close to skimming fingertips over George’s own. His chest is warm, too warm, and his jaw

grows slack.

“I think it looks good,” he murmurs, meeting George’s eyes. “Really, really good.”

George’s reaction is minuscule, easy for anyone to miss, but Dream prepared himself to detect it. His lashes flick up in a subtle, surprised jump, lips parting aimlessly, and a slight raise of his collarbones that could mean he’s held his breath.

“Thank you,” George says.

Dream’s favorite sight once again blooms across George’s face, and he smiles. “You’re blushing,” he comments.

George raises his hand to press fingertips lightly to his cheek. “Am I?” he asks, dazedly.

Dream looks down at him through lidded eyes, his voice a warm rumble. “Mhm.”

George stares back defensively, but his lips are pressed together in a poor attempt to hide a smile. “I am warm,” he says flatly.

Dream grins. His heart pounds. “Uh-huh.”

“I am going to get out,” George insists, pointedly slow to try and knock away Dream’s happiness.

“Okay,” Dream says simply. He lets George lean away from him and start to rise out of the hot tub. A light, sweet laugh escapes his lips.

George splashes him, the motion sudden but gentle, before exiting the tub for good and hauling a towel in tow. Dream watches him leave, water drips down his brows and from the tip of his nose, but he makes no effort to wipe it away.

His smile continues, and he raises a warm hand to cover it. He hopes it keeps raining for a while, washing over his house and filling up gutters and making a mess of his uneven lawn. It’s strange to have the feeling, a persistent glow in his chest, that tells him he’ll never be able to watch the movie or sit in his tub or listen to thunder without thinking of George in the same, fond heartbeat.

He hears a heavy tap on glass, and lifts his eyes to the light spilling from the kitchen window. Sapnap is wearing an apron he didn’t even know he owned, holding up a bowl of the promised pasta, and threatening to tip it into the sink.

“Alright!” he yells with a dismissive wave, breaking off into laughter. “Alright, I’ll be right in.”

## Chapter End Notes

this has by far been one of my favorites to write. really comforting and easygoing, get a little bit more about george's character my beloved, and so much rain imagery which I don't think I can ever get bored of describing. very fond of them all and happy with how this turned out! :D

I do want to be honest with you all, it's been difficult for me to stay motivated for this story and I just wanted to be upfront about that. I'm going on a chapter by chapter basis, not sure if I'll continue all the way to the end, but want you to know I'm trying to

stick with this commitment :) I appreciate all the love and support so much, and I didn't want to suddenly stop uploading in the future without y'all knowing why. haven't made any decisions yet and I think stuff may just be moving much slower than it already is. hopefully see you in another two weeks or so <3 !!

# Shutter

## Chapter Summary

A Disney trip is in order, with an unexpected addition to Dream's day.

## Chapter Notes

Hi all! Same boundaries about CC's and mentions as usual, be nice and be smart and enjoy the story :) This is a long one. Happy Disney.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The steady rumble of the engine thrums beneath Dream's shoes. Parked under bright sun in his driveway, he nudges at the console controls while the air-conditioning refuses to show mercy. Light sweat graces his jaw, touched by a warm breeze, as the open windows do little to relieve the heat.

"I'm forgetting something," he mumbles again. "I am. I know I am."

"What is taking George so long?" Sapnap asks, sliding down in the passenger seat. Another pair of sunglasses rests over the bridge of his nose, tinted brown; definitely stolen.

Dream sighs. "Dunno."

"What'd he say when you told him we'd be waiting?"

"Just that he'd be right out," Dream says, readjusting the ball cap curving over his head. His hair is warm beneath the dark canvas. He doesn't blame George for taking his time inside the cold, refrigerator of a house. "He did seem kind of distracted, though."

"You think he's nervous?" Sapnap questions, and Dream nods. "Why?"

Dream shrugs, holding a hand over the vents to feel them offer up a chill. "It might have to do with me asking about his—"

The word "*camera*" is caught right before it slips from Dream's mouth. Last night after bowls of spaghetti and hours of streaming, George made an offhand comment that he wanted to bring it with them today. When knocking lightly on his door to tell him they're ready to leave, Dream curiously brought it up again.

Sapnap is still unaware of its existence.

"His what?" Sapnap pushes, having caught Dream's hesitation immediately. "What does he have?"

Dream hopes one day to be a smarter man, and stop shoving himself in unnecessary dilemmas. He squints at Sapnap as though it'll minimize it. Answering him could smoothly avoid any issues of George being offended, or kickstart a day of harsh teasing. Perhaps Sapnap is more sensible than

George gives him credit for.

“Sapnap,” Dream says slowly, “hey.”

His eyebrows raise, and he sits up attentively. “Oh, okay.”

“I need you to be really serious with me for a second. I’m going to tell you something that is very important to George, and you have to listen carefully. Okay?”

“Um.” Sapnap regards him warily, pushing the sunglasses out of his face. “Sure.”

Dream purses his lips contemplatively, then continues. “Long story short, George has this special camera that he likes to take pictures on and he might be bringing it with—okay. No, no. Get that look off of your face.” He snaps his fingers at Sapnap sharply to dissuade his growing grin. “He’s *sensitive* about it. Look at me. You have to be nice.”

“He takes *pictures*?” Sapnap repeats gleefully, his breath dissipating into a laugh.

Dream shoves at his shoulder, which only makes his condition worse. “*Stop*. Stop getting ideas.”

“Dream.” Sapnap’s voice drops gravely. “Come on. That’s fucking hilarious, you can’t expect me not to—”

They both pause at the sound of the front door slamming shut. Sapnap’s eyes leap to meet his, mouth widening in an overwhelmed stutter of what to say first. Dream angrily steals the sunglasses off his head.

“Not a *word*,” he threatens in a hiss, pointing the plastic spokes towards Sapnap’s eyeballs. “I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you dead.”

Sapnap pulls a face at the seriousness in his tone, but leaves him a haze of whether he’ll listen or not. George approaches the car, and Dream tosses him a smile, peacefully withdrawing the glasses to rest in his collar.

“We ready?” George asks, sliding into the backseat.

The strap of his camera bag is slung across his chest, and he pulls the bulky base into his lap protectively. Black fabric and dark leather, held carefully in George’s hands with a promise of fragility, it seems undoubtedly special. Dream doesn’t understand why he’d brought it to Florida in the first place.

He can feel Sapnap’s curiosity, too, and prepares an apology for spilling the secret.

“That depends, George,” Sapnap says as Dream holds his breath. “Are you ready for the best day of your life?”

His eyes jump towards him in relief. The menacing grin has fallen away from his face, meaning he could be intentionally nice, or biding his innocence for a later attack. Dream finds the ambiguity scarily similar to that of his younger sister.

“I’m not sure about this being the ‘best’ day,” George responds vaguely.

Sapnap clears his throat. “Sorry, I think I misheard that. Can you try again?”

The gearshift stings the concave of Dream’s palm as he slides it into reverse. He turns around and grows wary at the sight of George’s sharp grin.

“I said,” George continues, “that today is going to stink.”

“I will crawl back there and strangle you.”

“Easy,” Dream says sharply, gaze passing between Sapnap and the rearview. “C’mon, guys. What’d we agree on?”

Their stream the day before had been hectic. Though they’d been careful to not mention their plans, tossing in valid excuses to throw viewers off the scent, the bickering grew out of hand. It was Quackity’s fault, with all of his “*mickey mouse streamer*” jokes that made George laugh too hard.

Once fully disconnected, the three set loose boundaries in hopes of keeping peace for the following day.

“No bitching at Disney,” Sapnap recounts. “But we’re not there yet. We’re on route.”

“En route,” Dream corrects as he pulls out onto the road. Sparse puddles from yesterday’s rain splash under his tires. “Still counts, though. George?”

“What he said.”

“George.”

“Ugh, fine.” George reclines dramatically in the middle seat, lips pressed together in a light smile. “Best behavior for Disney, or whatever.”

Dream nods in satisfaction. “For *Disney*,” he emphasizes to make Sapnap grin.

“Yee fuckin’ haw,” Sapnap says.

Disney music that would get them banned on Twitch begins to play from Sapnap’s phone, stereo trickling to life. Excitement for their outing drifts in with the oncoming air-conditioning.

Dream has never been one for Disney, or theme parks, or anything hot and overcrowded and sticky. Yet when his eyes slide to see Sapnap’s enthusiastic smile, sudden words of admission rise to his tongue. Meeting him for the first time on Main Street, joking awkwardly under the hot sun, and swearing to come back when they’re old enough to buy beer—it’s the only trip to the park that he’s truly enjoyed.

The words feel too heavy to pass on now. Instead, he lands a hand on Sapnap’s shoulder and gives it a hearty shake.

The ride continues with stifling warmth. Sidewalks are speckled from traces of morning drizzle, and the roads have usual midday traffic. Sapnap clings to the aux in the passenger seat, George reaches for a chance to add to the queue, and Dream’s phone starts to ring.

He glances habitually at George in the backseat. “That’s... strange.”

“Your girlfriend?” Sapnap jokes.

“What? No, it’s just—” Dream slides his buzzing phone out of his pocket, and hands it to Sapnap. “My do-not-disturb is on today. Who’s it?”

The jingling tone continues patiently, as Sapnap dials down the music to a low murmur. “Your mama.”

“Hah, seriously—wait. Seriously?” Dream slows as they pull up to an intersection, nodding when Sapnap tips it in question. The speaker clicks as it’s held close to Dream’s face. “Hi, Mom. What’s up?”

“Hey honey,” she greets. “We just went by the house and you weren’t home so I wanted to give you a call. Are you going to be back soon?”

He eyes the car riding his bumper in the rearview. “Uh, no, actually. We’ve got a big day planned. Why?”

There’s a brief pause over the line. A honk resounds behind him.

“It’s the eleventh, Clay,” she says lightly.

“The... the—*oh*.” Dream’s eyes widen as the stoplight flicks green. He eases off the brake pedal, distractedly glancing from the dashboard’s clock to the road. “Shit. I mean, shoot. Is she there with you?”

“Yes,” his younger sister’s voice pipes up through the speaker. “I can hear you.”

Dream’s chest tightens. “Oh god. Hey, this must have completely slipped my mind with the guys coming in town and all. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she says.

“It’s not. What—what can I do now?” he asks. “What is your guys’ plan?”

“Well, I have work in a bit but could maybe see if—” He hears his mother’s voice withdraw, and mutter away from the phone line. “Would you be fine coming in with me for the day?”

*The eleventh.* He recalls seeing the date from his mother’s calendar sandwiched between his own events, and curses himself for letting it slip him by.

“No, no, she doesn’t have to do that,” he rushes. “We’re going to Disney, Mom. And we—we were just talking about how we accidentally got extra tickets.” He waves for the other two in the car to speak up, head scrambling to smooth over the damage of his mistake.

“Hi!” Sapnap says into his palm.

Leaning forward to lodge his shoulders between their seats, George greets, “Hello.”

“Does she want to join us?” Dream asks quickly.

“Oh!” A pause of murmurs passes, then his mother affirms, “That would be great. She’d love to.”

“You sure it’s alright?” his sister questions.

“Yes, definitely,” Dream says vehemently, while a chorus of staggered “yeses” chime up behind him. “You caught us on our way there now. Where are you, Mom?”

“We just stopped for gas near the plaza. Do you want to meet us here?”

He scans the road signs overhead; they’re not too far for this to work smoothly. “Yeah, yeah. We’ll be there in like, five-ish. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect,” his mother says breezily, the audible shift making him relax. “We’ll see you

then.”

“Seeya. Buh-bye.”

Once the call is hung up for him, Dream blows out a steady breath to recalculate their plan for the day. Guilt claws unhappily in his chest. He looks at his passengers briefly before accelerating on the road.

“Okay. So, I completely forgot my sister was supposed to come hangout with me today. My mom has a big work thing and kind of hates leaving her alone, so—god.” Dream leans a heavy elbow on the divider between the three of them, and kneads at his jaw with his free hand. “I knew it. I knew I was forgetting something. I should’ve double checked, I’m such an—”

George’s knuckles press intentionally to the back of his bicep. Above the firm chill of an index finger, dipping below the fabric of Dream’s sleeve, a thumb brushes across his tan skin. The touch is quiet in its familiarity.

He relaxes his arm into it, briefly, before he feels George’s hand withdraw.

“I guess she’ll be joining us, if that’s okay,” Dream finishes, keeping his eyes on the streets. His bicep feels bare. *Why did George do that?*

“Awesome,” Sapnap says simply, reaching to nudge the music dial back up. “Clay Jr. is cool.”

“She doesn’t like you calling her that.”

“Lil’ Sap,” he tries.

“Even worse.”

“I’m meeting your sister?” George interrupts suddenly.

The constriction in Dream’s throat squeezes his words dry, and he swallows. “Uh, yeah. You finally are.”

George’s voice grows quieter. “And your mum?”

Music thumps in the blown speakers around them. Sunshine skips across the settled dust on his dash. He has a strange memory of being driven to an appointment by his mother as a teenager, and staring at the light soaking the windshield. Desperate to fill the silent void of their ride, he’d muttered: *I recently made a new friend, you know.*

“Yeah,” Dream repeats, breathing out the words carefully. “You will.”

The parking lot of the gas station is sparsely filled by the time they arrive. Dream scans the cars until he sees one he recognizes, and pulls into a nearby spot. The market windows, cluttered with posters and colorful ads, reflect his bumper back at them.

“Oh, there.” He waves at his sister, waiting in the passenger seat of his mother’s car. He frowns once he realizes she’s alone, and she points inside wordlessly. “Ah.”

Sapnap dips his head to look at Dream as he begins to leave the car. “Should we get out?”

Dream nervously glances between them and the sight of his sister approaching. “Yeah, sure.

Okay.”

He never intended for the meeting to appear so out of place, without plan and without warning. It’s not like George hasn’t spoken with his family before, entertained his sister on calls when he’s run off to the restroom, or exchanged words with his mother in easy pastime. Family and friends have long since been synonymous to them all.

Yet George knows everything he’s spilled about his family, years of growing away and moving closer, what has hurt him and what has stayed. The opposite is also true: his mother knows the other end of that “*everything*,” too. Here, his life could be collapsing under the weight of love on all sides.

Dream steps out in front of his car; his sister stops on the sidewalk before him.

“Hey dummy,” she says.

“Hi dummy,” he apologizes.

Her light eyes narrow as she squints at him. “Why Disney?”

Dream gestures over his shoulder to Sapnap, who is chatting with George on the other side of the car. “Idiot’s fault.”

She grins in approval. They both look back when George’s voice carries over the frame, and her face lights up. “Is that George?”

He opens his mouth to try for a response, but is cut off at the sight of his mother pushing past the gas station doors and coming towards them with a similar smile. Once close, she hands his sister a bag of seasoned pistachios.

“Here, sweetie. They didn’t have much else.”

“This is my lunch?” she questions dejectedly.

The cheap snack is passed to Dream for his judgement, and he glances over it. “I made some sandwiches for us this morning. You can just have mine.”

His mom gives him a look. He wants to tell her to not worry, and holds back from repeating words that have failed a myriad of apologies before. They’re closer now, he knows that. In some ways, it makes casual talk more exhausting than it used to be.

“Would you mind getting some slushies?” he directs towards his sister, tugging out his wallet to thumb through some money. “Two big ones.”

She takes the cash. “What flavor?”

“Dunno. All of ‘em.”

She leaves him with a handful of pistachios and the weight of his mother’s silence. Muffled engines hum in her absence. The asphalt smells like gasoline.

“Extra Disney tickets, hm?” his mom prods finally.

Dream raises his eyebrows. “I have extra tickets, if Marcus isn’t in town for your work-thing today.”

“How did...” She trails off contemplatively, and shakes her head. “Again with that damn—”

“Calendar, yeah,” Dream finishes with a grin. “Kick me off the Cloud share if you don’t want me being nosey.” His smile eases away as faint exhaustion settles on her face. “Come on, though, Mom. Odds are she already knows about him.”

“I know, I know. Today is just... always too soon.” His mother sighs, the light breath settling the air between them as Dream leans back on his car door. “Thank you for including her so last minute. It means a lot.”

“Are you kidding? Sapnap hasn’t shut up about hanging out with her since last weekend,” he says easily. “Plus, she’s saving me from going on any rides.”

“I’m glad that works out in your favor, then.” She tips her head to look over the car, and clears her throat, voice falling low. “So, should I introduce myself? Or are we waiting for you?”

He’s brought back down to the reality of their lot, the presence of a cross-Atlantic stranger waiting feet away, and his face grows hot. “Ah, right.”

The bag of pistachios is absently passed between his palms, shells rolling together noisily. He clears his throat in a poor attempt to dislodge his hitched breath. His mom settles a hand over his, and his fingers still.

“Right,” he repeats. As they turn towards his friends’ direction, he quickly mutters, “Before I do, he um—he likes his space. Okay?”

She raises her eyebrows at him, and slowly mouths a dramatic “*okay*.”

They make their way to the other side of the car. Cheap plastic crinkles in his grip as he tries to get their collective attention.

“Hey,” he says, and two pairs of eyes swivel to meet him. He gestures with his free hand. “Mom, this is George. George, this is my mother.” George doesn’t hesitate to offer a light nod. “And Sap—you know.”

*Was I breathing, when I said that? He watches carefully as the sight unfolds. Am I breathing now?*

“Of course.” His mom pulls Sapnap into a greeting hug with ease. “Hi, Nicky.”

He pats her back briefly before pulling away. “Hello, ma’am. How are you?”

“Oh fine, just fine. Glad you’re getting him out of the house.” She turns to face George with a soft smile. “George, honey, so good to see you. How was the flight in?”

George is quick to extend a handshake, and Sapnap shares a glance with Dream. The offer is far more formal than they’ve witnessed from him before; they’re bound to hassle him for it later.

“It was wonderful, thank you,” George replies, giving her the well-mannered tone that Dream has only heard when ordering food on calls together. He remembers hugging George at the airport, seeing his authentic smile for the first time, and asking him the same question.

“Awful,” he’d answered, like it was meant to be theirs, only.

Unaware of the surrealism of George’s composure, his mother nods pleasantly. “And they’ve been taking good care of you, I hope?”

“Yes, of course. It’s been great.”

“Well good, good,” she says, voice all shades of calm. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Dream looks between them restlessly. Something yellow in his chest continues to swell, pressing against his ribs, threatening to burst without warning. He knows Sapnap’s eyes are on him.

His mother tuts lightly. “I honestly feel that I’ve heard so much about you, George. I can’t believe we haven’t met before properly.”

“Me as well,” George says earnestly. “Though I did promise you I’d apologize the first time we’d meet, so: I’m very sorry.”

She tips her head at him quizzically. “Oh? You’ll have to remind me what for.”

“Keeping him up so late when your house was trying to sleep, ma’am.”

She immediately laughs in recollection, and Dream is glued incredulously to the whites of her teeth and shine in her eyes. People aren’t able to make his mother laugh so easily.

“I must be mistaken,” she says warmly. “I can’t imagine my Clay was yelling all that time at someone so polite.”

“It’s an act, Mom,” Dream intrudes, eyes flicking to George. He gives her a playful smile. “Don’t believe a word he says.”

Sapnap claps a hand on George’s shoulder. “I can vouch for that.”

“Are you trying to make me look bad?” George questions with feigned embarrassment, lifting Sapnap’s fingers off of him and letting his wrist drop.

Laughter is elicited from his mother again, and Dream’s head declutters at the jovial sound of it. Ease slips through his core, letting him chuckle softly, as he gazes at the contained charm of George’s smile. The only hint of nervousness he detects is the light interlocking of George’s hands, a silent palm clasped tightly over pale knuckles.

A chime carries from the gas station doors, and Dream turns to see his sister pushing her way through them. The slushie cups in her hands are monstrous.

“Well look, George, you’re going to be in town for a bit, yes?” his mother asks.

Dream sharply glances back.

“Yeah.” George clears his throat quickly, and speaks up, “Yes. About another week and a half.”

“If you get the chance, why don’t you come by for dinner?”

Dream’s jaw falls open. “Mom,” he tries, but her small hand gently connects with his arm.

“Don’t feel the need to say yes, you can think about it and let me know.” She waits until he gives her a hesitant nod, then pats his shoulder.

They haven’t acknowledged an ounce of it, yet—Sapnap’s inevitable departure in three days time, and the solitude that Dream and George will have no choice but to wade in. How will they survive long days and quiet nights, unscathed? Where will they be at the end of it? It sets off a faint panic in Dream that he doesn’t dare put into words.

“Alright. You boys be good.” She nudges the hair on his sister’s head as she greets them. “And you call me if you have any trouble, okay?”

“Yes, Mom,” his sister says, but lets her adjust stray strands anyway.

“I can keep you updated on our plans later. We’d be happy to drive her home,” Dream offers. It’s a bit of a way to his family’s house, but one he’s more than willing to cover to amend his forgetfulness.

“I’ll let you know.” His mother aims to press a kiss to his cheek, and he leans down habitually to let her. “Have fun today.”

They give her a disorganized jumble of parting words, and once she’s gone, Dream realizes his friends watched the fiasco with transparent amusement. He hastily wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.

“So your whole family’s that touchy?” George questions.

“Big time,” Sapnap says.

Dream’s sister extends a slushie cup to him. “Yep.”

“Oh, thanks.” Dream exchanges the pistachios for the drink, and doesn’t bother asking for the change. Condensation drops on the exterior, chilling his fingertips.

His sister’s gaze settles back on George silently. George returns the stare, with unsure glances to Dream and Sapnap.

“You’re GeorgeNotFound,” she says.

“You’re... Clay’s sister,” he jokes vaguely, to successfully make Dream smile.

“I think you should call me Nancy.”

George blinks at her. “I know that’s not your name.” The other cold slushie in her hand is held out towards him anyway, and he takes it gingerly. “Oh, okay. Thank you, ‘Nancy.’”

“How come I don’t get one?” Sapnap asks.

She shrugs.

Dream takes a sip from the plastic straw, and silently hands Sapnap the cup to share. Cold ice cools from the backs of his teeth down the length of his throat, settling calmly over any coals in his stomach that have been stirred by his mother’s presence. The chaotic blend of sugary flavors may be a mistake.

George hands the slushie back to his sister. “Nice to meet you.”

Dream’s keys jingle when he tugs the lanyard from his pocket. His heart has refused to cease pounding inside of his chest. By all means, they’d successfully averted any type of crises from such a slapdash introduction.

“Yeah,” he hears his sister say, as they gravitate back to the car. “My brother won’t shut up about you.”

From labyrinths of hot parking lots, to fussing over directions, tickets, proper application of sunscreen—Dream does not consider this to be the happiest place on Earth. He's been under duress since they spilled out of the car, and raided his scattered trunk of old hats and sunglasses for “identity protection.” As usual, Sapnap and his sister quickly teamed against him, dragging them from the yawning mouth of the park to an abundance of rides. It's been several years since he last set foot on the curving roads, probably in hand with someone he doesn't speak to anymore, and his hesitance is evident.

Lands he hardly remembers the names of are explored with determined enthusiasm. He observes the bright surroundings contentedly, waiting outside lines with other tired parents. Occasionally, he'll listen to his friends' complaints, and join them on any attractions that don't lift him too far off the ground.

George has taken it upon himself to keep Dream idle company. He lags back when the others' energy is too much, or disappears with them to eagerly join a ride. Once outside of a noisy fast-track lane, George hesitates on his departure, and pulls the strap of his camera bag over his head.

“Keep it safe?” he asks, extending it to Dream carefully.

Dream is instantly much happier to be the designated pack mule, as he answers, “Of course.”

When the three are finished and chatting about where to go next, Dream leans back under an awning in his precious stretch of shade. His palm is settled protectively over the base of the camera bag. He feels a lick of pride when George doesn't ask for it back.

Even though it was passed off with casualty, carrying such a prized object is personal, like they trust each other more than friends should. Then again, Sapnap did make Dream hold his half-eaten sandwich, so he reigns in his optimism.

At the excited mentions of teacups, he lifts his aviators to rub at his eyes. His stomach aches at the idea, but he pulls the map from the side pouch on his bag anyway to chart the course.

“Just give us the map,” Sapnap says.

Dream holds it away from his grabby hands, again. “Hey, hey. Back off. You're gonna rip it.”

“You suck as the map guide,” his sister agrees, slipping it out of his fingers in the prime of his distraction. “George wants the teacups, too. Don't you, George?”

George looks away from a nearby pretzel stand, and back to their group. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Dream tugs his shades back down. “You don't have to agree with everything she says.”

“Yes he does.” His sister's attention drops downward as Sapnap huddles over the map in her hands. They begin to craft an unorganized plan without mercy for Dream's sigh.

George peers up at him in further question, from beneath the floppy bucket hat he'd been forced to wear. His cheeks have a slight rosiness under the soft luster of lotion.

*Cute.*

“You don't,” Dream reassures quietly, and George shrugs.

“There's no harm in it.”

The map is shoved between them abruptly. “Dream, look,” Sapnap says, pointing towards a corner of colorful streets. “This is where we first met.”

Dream looks down with a nostalgic smile. “Star it. We can send my Mom a picture of us there, on our way out.”

He leans off his backrest and turns his bag towards Sapnap, feeling as he hunts for a loose pen in the outer pocket.

“I remember that,” his sister says.

Sapnap holds the map up to Dream’s shoulder, and scribbles on the sleek surface. “No you don’t. You weren’t born yet.”

“*What?* Yes I was.”

Dream refocuses on George as they delve into further bickering behind him. They begin to step away from his shady solace, back to the river of traveling tourists, but George doesn’t move. Dream follows the direction of his gaze to the nearby food stand.

“Do you want a pretzel?” he asks.

“Huh? Oh, no, I was just—” George’s mouth presses together, and he exhales lightly. “Kind of.”

Dream taps the brim of his dark hat fondly. “C’mon.”

He keeps an eye on the wandering map fiends while buying from the vendor. Wrapped in the famous logo and bread twisted to mimic it, he hands George the warm pretzel. The savory scent of it floats into the humid air between them.

“Thank you,” George mutters.

“No problem.”

They continue walking, trailing behind their company, shoes scuffing slow on the spotted concrete. George’s camera bag sways against Dream’s hip, and he uses a mindful hand to steady it from jostling too much.

“So,” he says. “Thoughts on the park so far?”

George hums, swallowing a bite of the dough. “It’s big.”

He laughs. “It is, it is.” Dream pauses, eyes dancing over the tops of strangers’ heads lazily. “Let me know if you want to bring home any more Disney shit, by the way. Some ears, or a t-shirt, or a tutu—”

“The pretzel is fine,” George insists fervently, smothering his smile with another mouthful.

“You sure? Cause that’s what I’m here for. To buy stuff, and nothing else.” Dream grins as his patronage earns an amused scoff. “I have to be good to you. Mom’s orders.”

“Sapnap seems very happy about that,” George dismisses.

Dream loops his thumb in the strap of his bag, keeping his elbow close to not nudge the set of small shoulders next to him. “He definitely does.”

They stroll together idly, turning when his sister turns, and surveying the people that pass them by. The dark ball cap on Dream's head grows hot from the beating sun, and though he was teased relentlessly for it, he does feel that wearing it hides his face well enough. They've successfully avoided being recognized so far.

"She's really nice, your mum," George says suddenly.

"Yeh." A piece of the pretzel is torn off and extended to Dream, and he takes it gratefully. "She seemed happy to meet you."

George turns his head quickly. "Oh, did she?"

Dream side-eyes his valiance, suppressing a smile as he chews. "Mhm."

"Huh." George begins to wander paces in front of him, cupping the pretzel to his chest. "It feels like your family knows a lot about me, Dream."

The threat of spinning teacups is less dizzying than this. Strange momentum twirls the nerves in Dream's chest, to leave his brain in a scramble of George's doing.

"If I recall correctly, yours knows a lot about me, too." His voice oozes with a warm confidence that George either grins at, or despises. "Isn't that right?"

His heart flops helplessly when George tosses a smile over his shoulder. "Right."

Dream's awareness is brought to the difference in their strides, as George slows to walk next to him again. His shoes are clean and crisp as usual, but half the size of Dream's. He fights the urge to smile as he studies it.

"Should we take her up on her offer?" George asks.

Dream's eyes flick up beneath the dark cover of his sunglasses. His gaze steels ahead into Sapnap's back, which is undeserving of the interest, despite the hoodie he'd stubbornly brought now tied around his waist.

He likes the way that George says "we." If he's not careful, he knows he'll get addicted to that feeling.

"About dinner?" he clarifies aimlessly, wiping at the light sheen of sweat coating the back of his neck. "It's up to you."

"Do you think it was rude of me to not say yes right away?" George asks, with enough moderation to make Dream's chest grow warm.

"No, George."

After a moment, George mutters, "I have another question."

"What is your other question?"

"Did you, like, ask her to not hug me, or something?"

Dream tips his nose down, and peers at George over the top of his sunglasses. "Did you *want* her to hug you?" He pauses, letting his dark eyes fall away dismissively. "She would have if I didn't, to be fair. You don't have to be so worried."

“I’m not—” George breathes, then takes a mournful bite of his pretzel. Muffled, he continues, “I just want the people in your life to like me, s’all.”

The confession rekindles a smothered warmth inside of him, and his smile lights at the sudden oxygen. He bumps George’s arm playfully, sending a jostle through his shoulders. “Sapnap likes you. My sister likes you.”

George nudges him back dismissively. “You know who I’m talking about.”

“Who, Patches?” he teases. “Cause you definitely have her approval already.”

“Stop being dumb. Your mum is different.”

Dream grins again at the soft clip of his accent. “Why, though? It’s not like you’re my—”

The words scrape his ears as they collide with sharp silence. Dream catches his obvious trajectory with the back of his teeth, lips enclosed around his exhale, attempting to swallow it whole.

*Boyfriend.*

He can feel how abruptly George’s open presence abandons him. From the halt in his breath to the stillness of his hands, Dream knows George heard the ghosted term fall. He doesn’t dare turn his head.

“I... I know that,” George says, tersely. “I know.”

His side-glances rap against Dream’s skin, blistering him in silence. The horrors of the theme park reverberate in Dream’s ears with a nauseating hum.

“I know,” George repeats.

“I’m sorry. That came out weird.” Dream wants to wince at the sound of his own voice; how it lingers, unanswered. He tugs off his sunglasses to confront him in an unobstructed view. “George —”

“No, let’s—” George avoids his eyes rapidly. “Let’s not. Not today. Yeah?”

A terrifying conglomerate of fear and regret cements in Dream’s throat. His vision is blinded by the repetition of colorful logos, cheerful slogans, and caricatures all iterating a message that mocks him. He promised to keep the peace and harmony of this place, and with hours of walking and rides left before them, he knows he can’t bring himself to break it.

“...Okay,” he says.

George attempts to flash him a reassuring smile, but Dream sees how it never quite reaches his eyes.

The teacups only make him feel worse. Dream should’ve expected pure violence once his sister and Sapnap got hold of the center wheel, but his faith in their benevolence is his downfall. They laugh at his misery. He threatens to get sick. All of his pleas are lost to their endless cackling, and his brain rots as the spinning continues.

Somewhere in the midst of the torture, their laughter and smiles make it worthwhile. He neglects to join them again, or on the next few rides, instead focusing on recovering from the nausea.

On their way to the next destination, George rejoins him in the back of the group. Dream stays uncomfortably silent in his surprise as a temperate breeze washes over them. The scent of nearby water and sweet foods is carried with it.

“So.” George’s cheek turns as he looks up at Dream, and asks, “Thoughts on the park?”

Dream meets his eye timidly. He’s been watching George interact with his sister, and joke with Sapnap, but seeing him brush off their altercation is more frightening than he expected.

Yet George gazes at him, inviting and genuine as he waits. Dream presses his lips together in a grateful smile.

“I think it’s going to kill me,” he admits.

“Hm.” George furrows his brow light-heartedly. “Would it be such a bad way to go?”

Dream lets out a forlorn sigh. “Only if I could go visit the—”

“Epcot ball, we get it,” George interrupts, and chuckles softly. “Why do you keep saying that? What is it with that place?”

Dream turns to him. “The *history*, George. The *culture*. Think of all the pretty pictures you could take if we went there.”

George huffs. “You’re so weird. You talk about my camera more than I do.”

“Well, it *has* been hanging off my back all day,” Dream says. He sees George’s face fall lightly. “Which is fine, more than fine. Really, I—I like carrying it. Makes me feel important.”

His honesty earns a laugh. Dream forces his eyes to drift away from George as his face grows warm.

“I have been wondering,” Dream prods, curiously, “why did you bring it along if you’ve hardly touched it?” He sees Sapnap and his sister at a booth on the side of the walkway, talking and pointing to stuffed animals hanging on the wall. As George opens his mouth, he suddenly interrupts, “You know what, sorry, hold that thought. I’ll be right back.”

Dream quickly slings his backpack around to the front of his chest, and draws out his wallet as he approaches them. He smiles politely at the uniformed workers behind the counter.

“Hi!” he says happily. “Can I get that one, and the one next to it, please?”

Sapnap rapidly turns to look at him. “Dream—”

“Thank you.” Dream exchanges his card towards an employee, while the other takes down the requested merchandise. He has the animals in his hold and is passing them to Sapnap before he can get a word in edgewise.

“Dude,” Sapnap says finally, arms full of the bombarded gifts.

His sister takes the one she’d been eyeing, reluctantly. “It’s easier if you just let him do this,” she mutters, but is unable to hide her smile. “Thanks, Clay.”

Dream nods as he puts his wallet in his bag, and retreats back to George, who hasn’t moved in the duration of his absence.

“Sorry about that. What were we—your camera, right?” he questions. “How come you brought it here?”

George studies him, silently, and he feels a nervous flicker in his chest. “Just in case,” George says gently.

A quizzical smile settles on Dream’s face. “In case of what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

George’s eyes are on him and show no sign of drifting away. It floods Dream with a torrent of confused adrenaline. Shouldn’t he be angrier, not letting Dream’s arm brush his, choosing to walk far away from him, and speaking colder than he is now?

“You might be the most cryptic person I’ve ever met,” Dream confesses.

George looks at him with a light smirk. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Good,” he breathes quickly. A quiet pause rests in the air, and he reiterates, “Always good.”

“Always is a big word,” George says.

Dream smiles. “I’m a big-word kind of guy.”

The eye roll Dream receives makes his pulse flutter in his chest. *What is this?* he wants to ask. *Is this old, or is it new?*

Rocks coated with shades of orange rise in front of them as they continue to wander forwards, talking sweetly or not talking at all. The flow of George’s voice waxing and waning in sync with his own, so seamlessly, makes Dream’s heart continue to pound. His sister falls back to slide between them eventually, linking her elbow with Dream’s, but George inducts her to their conversation with ease. He tells her stories and asks questions like he’s always known her, and always been there.

Dream’s distaste for Disney melts, slowly, in the caverns of his heart.

His sister skips forward when a tall, rushing mountain comes into view, guarded by rails and crowded lines waiting for the watery ride. She stands next to Sapnap at the base of it, and they bump the fists of their stuffed animals together excitedly. Dream bought them a matching pair of the creature “Stitch,” one pink, and one blue. He’s amused to see who will end up with magentas and lilacs in hand at the end of the day.

He opens his mouth to comment on it to George, but is shushed before he can get a word out. Frowning, he attempts again, “What—”

“Just—quiet, be quiet,” George rushes under his breath, glancing rapidly from where the two stand meters away. His hands quickly reach around Dream’s waist, knuckles grazing his tense abdomen, and leaving a careless trail of firing nerves behind.

He unzips the bag at Dream’s hip.

Dream’s lips part silently as the sleek camera is pulled into daylight. He watches George’s nimble fingers fly over the controls, his movements practiced and graceful, as he uncaps the lens and lifts it up.

His dark brows are pinched together. The roar of the roller coaster's splash descends around them, tangled with thrilling cheers, and the sound of Sapnap whooping happily.

The shutter of George's camera slices cleanly through the noise.

By the time Dream cares to look where the photo is aimed, he sees his sister and Sapnap drenched from the spray of the ride. They're laughing, clothes spattered in dark splotches, shaking droplets from their shoes and reveling in the magic that embraces them.

"Oh," Dream says. He turns back towards George, who immediately tilts the screen of his camera out of view. "What, I don't get to see?"

George's eyes crinkle as he smiles. "Nope."

In his hands, the shiny box gleams with secrecy against the center of his chest. George recaps it with mindful fingers; Dream gazes down at him warmly.

"C'mon," he murmurs. "Lemme see it."

"No."

Dream tilts his head in disdain. George mimics him, and he feels a hitch of surprise at how animated he's been today.

"You'll have to hand the camera back to me, you know," he bargains. "Seeing as I have the bag and all."

George's pale jaw tips up in defiance, and Dream lets his eyes slip openly over the curves on his face. The shadow of his bucket hat falls midway down his nose. Above a lightly stubbled chin, his soft mouth is quirked playfully.

"What if I just hold on to it?" George tests. "Then what?"

Dream dares to reach for George's neck and adjust a twist in his camera strap. George's eyes drop to follow every inch of the motion as Dream's hand smooths the fabric on his collarbone.

"I could just steal it from you," Dream pretends.

George nudges his fingers away with the back of his hand. "You won't."

"I won't."

A sharp patter of footsteps causes him to finally tear his eyes off George, and he's greeted with a wet hug from his giggling sister. He accepts the change of temperature wholeheartedly.

"We have to go on," she muffles gleefully into his chest.

He pushes her damp hair away, studying the dark stain it leaves behind. "You guys are more than welcome to. I have towels in the car."

"No," she says, as Sapnap joins her side. "We have to go on. All of us. Including you."

Dream laughs shortly. "Funny. You're a comedian."

"Dream," Sapnap pleads. "Just this once, come *on*."

““Just this once?”” he echoes, eyes leaping from their abysmal smiles to the steep drop of the coaster behind them. “What about the teacups? Or the pirate-thing? Or the carpets—”

“Those are *mild*. Itty-bitty-baby rides. They don’t count.”

“Exactly,” he drawls, shaking his head as Sapnap opens his mouth again. “That’s my limit. I cannot do *that*.”

His stomach plummets as they watch another group descend the rushing slope. He does not understand how they’re laughing as their screams dissipate in a spray of white water.

“But George said he’d only go on if you did,” his sister says.

He watches George’s brows draw together. “I did?” His sister nudges him. “Oh. I mean, yes, Nancy, I did.”

Dream stares at them blankly.

“Do I...” The volume of George’s voice drops in an attempt for secrecy. “Do I have to get wet, though?”

Dream grins at his sister’s irritated groan. “This isn’t going to work,” he says, retracting the stuffed animals from their hands. “Go have fun. I’ll keep these dry.”

He ignores the guilty pang at how dramatically sad the two of them look, and refuses to budge. Wrapping the fuzzy gifts in his arms, he musters up a soothing smile, as the prospect of him joining them begins to retreat.

“It doesn’t seem like that bad of a drop, actually,” George muses.

Dream’s eyes jump sharply towards him. Intense horror begins to twist in his gut at the way George is studying the ride with quiet intrigue.

“No,” he rasps.

George smiles as he looks back at him. “It looks kind of fun.”

“It is,” Sapnap encourages quickly. “Very fun, totally worth it.”

The three of them dare to turn their gazes on Dream. His eyes widen, as he flicks from face to face, getting the faint feeling that he should cherish these last moments of his life. George meets his growing panic with an apologetic look.

“We should give it a try,” he says lightly, floating with enough soft curiosity to make Dream’s face fall. George could’ve whispered, “*you’re going*,” and it would have evoked the same, visceral fear.

“Don’t do this to me,” Dream warns. “Please, George.”

“Hear him out,” his sister says while Sapnap begins to laugh.

“Stop enabling him,” Dream demands callously. “As a matter of fact, stop enabling each *other*. I will take us out of this park right now if you don’t—”

“Are you still afraid of heights?” George questions suddenly.

Dream narrows his eyes. “I... am.”

“It’s only the one fall, Dream,” he says. “Just once, and then that’s it. Right?”

George takes a light step forward. Dream leans back. He’s unsure what he finds so intimidating about a trio of short instigators, who he could tip like bowling pins with an easy nudge.

Dream’s voice is low. “You don’t get it.”

“Why not?” George asks, as though they’re alone in an empty park, standing and waiting for rain.

Dream exhales lightly. “Let’s say I do go on. It’s just one drop for you guys, sure, but *I’ll* be sitting there absolutely losing it. I could pass out. And when the *drop* comes, I’d probably pass out again.” His voice pitches with strain. “Maybe I’d start bawling, too. Does that sound like fun? You guys want to see me literally become an infant again?”

He hears his sister giggle, but George’s gaze softens without warning. “I don’t think you would,” he says.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Dream rushes wildly. “Cut it out. There’s nothing you can say that would make me get on that thing.”

A tense silence settles over them. His breath slowly calms down from tightened breaths he wasn’t aware had formed in his ranting, and he meets George’s dark gaze.

“What if I offered you a deal?” George asks hesitantly.

Dream glances at the other two, then back down. “A deal?”

George reaches up, and pulls Dream’s head down by a palm on the back of his neck. His body bends forward rapidly before he can process the distance decreasing. Eyes wide, knuckles pushed against George’s sternum, he feels his breath warm on his ear.

Quietly, George proposes, “What if I show you the picture I took?”

The air in Dream’s lungs rushes out at once, gliding over George’s shoulder. “Wh—what?”

“Go on it with us,” he whispers, “and I’ll show you the camera.”

The nerves below his hairline sing with every fleeting moment that George’s fingers press against them. Dream’s gaze floats up warily to his sister, whose attention is quickly snagged by Sapnap gesturing elsewhere. He lets himself ease back to George, resisting the urge to drop his hands and pull him in by his waist.

“You’re joking,” Dream mutters, as George’s touch slips away. “Why would you just for this—this stupid ride?”

George leans back, and pulls his camera strap over his head. He lowers it back into the bag while he speaks carefully.

“I want to make the most of my time here,” he says lightly, then pauses. “The most of my time with... with you. If that means helping you branch out a little more, then—” His eyes slowly lift to Dream, and he blinks. “I’m willing to try that, too.”

“You’ll show me the photo,” Dream says flatly. His heart is in his throat.

“I will.”

He shakes his head the moment George smiles. “I don’t believe you. I’m not going to go on that thing and lose a—a *canon* life, just for you to laugh it off and not show me.” His voice grows quiet. “What if you’re lying?”

As though simplicity is enough to rewrite any traces of fear between them, George mutters, “Trust me.”

Dream’s head echoes back memories of soft words over the phone line, light fingers sifting gently through his hair, the feel of gazing up into a steady downpour of rain.

*Trust.*

The sounds of the park fade around him as he considers what George’s offer means. He thinks of the way George holds his camera, protectively, right over his heart. A vulnerable exchange of a photo for fear will break them both open. How could Dream ever refuse?

“I really, really hate you,” Dream says hoarsely.

The nervous tangle in his gut briefly vanishes when George gives him a smile. “I’m okay with that.”

At the first sign of success, Sapnap grabs them by the elbows and tugs them towards the ride.

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Dream is shown two pictures for the price of one.

The first he can hardly process, with his throat screamed raw and hands trembling as he stumbles to the nearest bench. Sapnap shoves a printed image taken mid-ride under his nose, and claps his back as cackles unfold around him. Crowded in a log-shaped coffin, descending to their doom, the grainy film immortalizes his sister and Sapnap’s grins.

Dream stares at the himself in the photograph.

He knows he’d been babbling like a maniac, sitting next to George and panicking up until the moment the final drop tore the life from his lungs. He’s still dripping with water and sweat from the consequences of the ride. What he didn’t know was that he’d buried his face into George’s shoulder, interlocking their knuckles in a terrified grip, while George’s free palm pulled his head closer in comfort.

It’s the first photo of the two of them to exist, and it looks like *this*?

Dream tries to makes sense of it during his recovery. George’s thoughtfulness for his fears is nothing new. He must’ve been too surprised to shake Dream off, letting him latch onto his hand mid-ride, but ultimately uncomfortable about it. Yet the smile on George’s face in the frame makes Dream taste hope. He swallows, and doesn’t catch the usual guilt that comes after it.

Head on fire, he asks George to see the second photo.

“You look like you’re going to be sick,” George postpones, politely. “Just wait until you can see straight.”

After twenty minutes of walking in damp clothes and another five slumped on a bench, Dream is

finally shown the camera. His sister and Sapnap have run off to ride the glamorous *Space Mountain*, and on the third time around, George declines their invitation. The day has been wearing on them enough to hint at it drawing to a close as the sun lowers in the sky with similar exhaustion.

“How are you feeling?” George asks as he carefully sits down next to him.

Purple and blue lights glow and bounce off their metallic surroundings. Families pass by them with murmured plans of an oncoming fireworks show. Dream’s bench has become his place of admittance, made of dark green wire as he finally sinks into himself.

“I have a headache,” he mutters.

A pause settles over them. George silently pulls his camera from the bag and switches the screen to display his gallery.

“We had a deal,” he says hesitantly, holding it towards Dream. “It’ll look better once I go in and tweak some things, I know the lighting isn’t great and I probably should’ve focused it more, so I’m sorry if it’s—”

Dream’s racing thoughts slow to a gentle lull as he locks onto the image. “George.”

“...Yeah?”

His eyes trace over every inch of the beautiful, captured moment. It’s of Sapnap and his sister by the edge of the same coaster that nearly killed him, yet they’re caught in a glistening spray of falling water. Smiles fold across their faces so vividly he can hear the high shrieks of their laughter. The fluffy animals he’d bought them are held, defensively, to their chests or mid-air to block the oncoming wave.

They’re swimming in joy. If Dream didn’t know better, he’d mistake them for family.

Slowly, chest heavy with feelings he cannot name, he looks up. “You should never apologize before showing me something that you care about. This is incredible.”

George’s eyes are wide under the praise, reiterating Dream’s memory of their time in the hot tub. A light smile lifts across his face. “Really?”

“I was right there, right next to you, and I didn’t catch a second of this.” Dream lets out a huff of astonishment. “I mean, how did you know when it was the right time? It passed me by but you—you saved this for me. Forever.”

“It’s just a picture,” George dismisses under his breath.

Dream smiles. “Bullshit. This is worth a thousand rides on that splashy-mountain nightmare.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it,” Dream says, his voice firm with admiration.

He watches as the camera is tucked away quietly. George unknowingly rolls his wrist once it’s free, curling fingers into his palm and flexing them as though they hold a hidden ache. Dream thinks of the on-ride photo stored neatly in his backpack, and though he can’t remember much beyond the feel of a small hand in his, he frowns.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks quietly.

“What?” George stops stretching out his fingers to regard him. “Oh, from squeezing my—no. I’m okay.”

His eyes trace over his thin knuckles with uncertainty. “You’re not just saying that, right? You’d let me know?”

“I...” George lets out a short breath. “I guess it did hurt a little, at first.” When he sees Dream blanch, he quickly adds, “It went away immediately, though. Oh my god, what are you—stop, I don’t need painkillers. I promise I’m alright.”

“Are you sure?” Dream pushes, slow to return the bottle to the first-aid kit. George gives him a look. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

His fingers twitch nervously where they rest on the space between them. In the silence, his growing aspiration tells him that if he *did* try, maybe George would let him search for invisible wounds on his palms. Dream carefully pulls his hands together to stay controlled in his lap.

“Actually, George, I *am* sorry,” he finds himself saying, and pauses for his mind to catch up to his mouth. “For... for what I said earlier. Or what I *didn’t* say. I know you probably don’t want to hear it because we’re trying not to argue on ‘Disney day,’ but—it’s true. It was dumb of me to joke about that. I’m sorry.”

Without pause, George mutters, “It’s okay.”

Dream’s lips part at him in silence. Inches away from each other on an uncomfortable bench, numbed after a day of strange conversations and timid smiles, he still doesn’t understand George.

He tries and fails to be soothed by George’s acceptance of his apology. The light breath he draws in is saturated with humid air.

“I honestly don’t understand why you’re not more upset with me,” he says.

“I’m used to it.”

Dream stares at him sharply. “What?”

George finally looks at him, eyes caught in mild surprise as he rephrases, “I—I mean that you’ve said things like that to me for a while, Dream.” His voice drops quietly. “So I’m used to it.”

The tired nonchalance of his words strikes Dream across the face as a well-earned slap. Years of unrequited yearning have done this to George. Even now, after the acknowledgement of their mutuality, Dream *still* finds a way to unearth his old wounds. How many times has he made jokes that hurt, without realizing? At what point did George try to move on?

“Shit,” is all Dream can say. His breath is low; his eyes fall with it.

He hears George huff lightly beside him.

A long stretch of silence sits on their shoulders that they don’t try to fill. It feels like a shared recognition; the present is all that matters, now. Meeting Dream’s family, adventuring busy theme parks, making excuses to stand closer or reach for each other’s hands.

“*We*,” George had said. Dream wants more than anything to believe in the possibility.

*We walked side by side all day. We shared a sandwich that I packed for him.* Dream glances

towards George on the bench, heart beating loud and slow. *We always end up waiting like this. On the phone, in the hot tub, in the kitchen.*

*We always end up here.*

“Can I ask you something?” George questions, and Dream nods. “Why... Why do you dislike this place so much?”

A drawn out sigh leaves his lips in response.

George frowns. “You seem like you really enjoy it sometimes. Then it goes away, whenever you’re reminded where you are.”

“I’m not sure how to answer that,” Dream says. “I was never really a Disney kid, I guess, so I don’t get all excited about it like they do.”

“Didn’t you come here a lot, though?”

“Yeah. Mostly before my sister was born, but like I said, I didn’t get much out of it.” A smile passes across Dream’s face before he can help it. “Well, I mean, it was kind of nice when I was too young to go on all the big rides.”

“That’s a weird thing to be fond of,” George muses.

“Yeah, yeah,” he dismisses. “I just wasn’t forced to do anything I didn’t want to. I could wait at the bottom with my mom, eating ice cream, while everyone else went on ahead.” His smile begins to soften. “I... I remember this one time, my older sister somehow convinced her to go on a ride, and my dad stayed with me instead.”

George turns to face him, and Dream’s eyes drop down to his lap.

“He uh, he didn’t really know what to do, y’know?” Dream chuckles lightly, fingers braiding together on his thighs. “We were never all that close. But... he bought me this stupid balloon. Like that’d make everything magically better, and I’d fall in love with Disney right there, on the spot.” He pauses as the words fade out, letting the low swoop in his stomach rise up between his ribs. “He had this huge smile on his face when he handed it to me, though, and for a moment, it worked.”

Dream can faintly hear the park chatter in his memory; see the warm expression of someone bound to be a stranger. His chest aches with the slow realization as he sinks into the tar of old scars.

“He never really looked at me like that again.”

Dream’s fingertips are wrapped tight over his knuckles, and he unclenches them once aware of the strain. The feeling collects in his chest, too; steady breaths ease it away.

“Why did you agree to bring us here?” George asks quietly.

Dream looks at the glinted concern in his eyes, and smiles dryly. “Gotta rewrite the old to work on the new, right?”

His eyebrows raise. “Is that really your rhetoric?”

“It could be.”

Silence becomes of them again as any worries from George’s gaze are left unsaid. Dream is

beginning to grow fond of it. They stare at the space-themed constructions around them, and his eyes snag on a small puddle somehow leftover from yesterday's rain. The endless sun and hours of heat hadn't evaporated it away.

George hops off the bench suddenly. Dream looks at him.

"Can we go on a walk?" he asks.

Dream gives him a soft smile, and eases onto his feet. His legs no longer feel like they're fresh off the boat, having finally recovered from the uneasy coaster ride. Their quiet stroll stabilizes lingering paranoia as he walks, heel to toe, in rhythm.

"Is this their last ride?" George asks eventually.

Dream nods. "I think I'm going to break the news when they're done."

"Sapnap seems pretty beat. I'm sure he's—oh, there we go."

Dream glances around their empty surroundings at George's sudden pause. "Where are they?"

His question is ignored. George tugs his wallet from his pocket, and pulls out U.S. dollars.

"What? What are you doing?" Dream asks, before his eyes finally land on the employee surrounded by inflated mouse ears, attached to a hoard of strings. George meanders his way towards her, leaving Dream no choice but to follow.

He lays a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "What," he repeats, "are you *doing*."

George shrugs him off. "Buying you a balloon."

"No, you're not." Dream reaches for his wallet when George starts to walk again. "I'm serious, George, no."

To his surprise, George listens. His money is tucked back and out of sight before Dream has the chance to catch up to the motions. Halted in his path to the waiting worker, he looks up at Dream with an even smile, making his breath halt.

"Fine," George says. "Then buy *me* one."

Dream scoffs. "What?"

"I want a balloon," George insists.

"No you don't."

His face draws together in a familiar, stubborn ploy. "Yes, I do."

Dream studies his expression with exhaustion, and relents. He unburies his card from his backpack to politely greet the balloon-holder. He chooses a blue one that's easy on the eyes, encased in a clear shell. It's the darkest out of all the options, but faint sunlight and shapes dance through the plastic as he hands it to George.

"Thank you," George chirps. Not a moment after they've stepped away, he shoves his closed hand towards Dream.

"Wh—"

“Can you hold this for me?” he asks. He waves the string in front of him with a satisfied smile, and Dream stares at him in defeat.

“Oh my god,” he mumbles, taking the balloon from George’s hand.

George laughs as he begins to sulk to their bench, walking backwards to keep ogling at the defeated look on Dream’s face. “You’re so *easy*,” he teases. “I didn’t even have to try.”

Dream tugs down the balloon, and thumps it airily against George’s nose. “Shut up.”

George bats it away with a hollow noise as his palm collides with the rubber. Dream bumps it again on top of his head, and giggles.

“I will pop it,” George complains.

“Bummer,” Dream says warmly, tucking the balloon under his chin as he gazes down. He sees George’s mouth open and stall as a curious light crosses his face.

He reaches down to his bag on Dream’s hip. “I have an idea.”

The weight of the camera leaves the shoulder strap, and Dream’s hand tightens on the plastic string. He quickly glances at George’s concentrated expression, the idea of another photo making his chest stir with curiosity, until the lens is tipped towards him.

His heart pounds heavily. “George?”

The hand on the balloon string is nudged towards his torso; George’s fingertips are cold on his knuckles.

“Hold it in front of your head,” George directs gently.

Dream listens, and hesitantly hides himself behind the colored ears. He can hardly see beyond the blue nylon, but he *feels* George’s camera on him, and doesn’t remember how to blink.

The exposure wracks inside of him with uncertainty. He thinks of himself, frozen in a piece of George’s life, to be taken across thousands of miles when the trip is finally over. His facelessness is bound to live forever.

Even though he can’t see it, George says, “Smile.”

Even though he’ll never know, Dream does.

The click of the camera follows not a moment later. Dream slowly lowers the balloon, and sees George studying his screen with a grin. The sky behind him is fading pink, silhouetting him with tangerine, and Dream wishes he was bold enough to take a photo, too. He knows better than to ask to see it.

“Is there a reason you don’t want my face in it?” Dream jokes, desperate to understand, but it falls flat when he watches George’s face falter.

His mouth slowly closes from its amused smile. A complicated look writes across the pull of his brows as he swallows, and Dream watches the movement bob in his pale throat. George’s eyes float past his shoulder.

“I think I see your sister,” he says, and shuts off the camera for good.

The sun has gone by the time Dream's car pulls up to his family's residence. After voting to leave the park and arranging phone calls with his mother, they decided to take his sister home. The drive is long, and dark, but calming in its familiarity. They lean into leather seats with sweat-dried skin as yawns become a common passing.

The car frame rumbles as they pull up to the curb. Dream's mother left the porch lights on, and he can see moonlight shimmering on the lake beyond it.

"I'm uh, I'm going to walk her in," Dream says, voice low from the warm silence. His sister's hair glows yellow as she passes the headlights of his car.

He doesn't ask his friends to come with him.

Dream joins his sister on their path to the front door, and she doesn't say a word besides lightly nudging him to trek in the grass. She's used to his hovering. He tries to ignore the small nagging in his gut, telling him he doesn't call enough, or should take her out to lunch more often.

She steps up onto the front patio and mumbles a parting "seeya."

"Next time you can stay the night," Dream says.

She shrugs. "Maybe when the season is over."

"Good luck with practice tomorrow." He smiles lightly at her eye-roll.

In a light, arid tone of their mother, she mocks, "'Bright and early.'"

"Bright and early, that's right," he agrees through a chuckle, reaching to sling his arm around her shoulder.

She leans into his side as they hug, and the blue-colored Stitch is sandwiched between them.  
"Thanks for today. T'was fun."

He lets his forearm slide away from her shoulders. "Text me, okay?" A faint pang carries its way through his chest; no matter how much they've grown over the years, bumming knees and comparing heights, she still is so small.

She stalls with her hand on the brass doorknob, and lets her fingers slide away. "Hey, Clay?"

"Yeah?"

Her mouth is open in a silent stutter, before finally she says, "I really like George."

He grins immediately. "That's good. I'm glad you do."

She nods with finality and glances away, so he steps off the patio. He can see George and Sapnap through the windows of his car, waiting behind the idle glow of their phone screens. The night air is warm on his throat.

"I, um. I didn't know." The quiet strength in her voice causes him to turn back.

He meets her gaze halfway, brows drawing together in concern. "Know... what?"

"That you like him, too."

Dream's face heats up as they regard each other from several feet of silence away. Their world of grass and concrete seems noiseless besides the faint hum of bugs in the night.

"Oh," he manages to say.

"But like I said, I think he's nice. And funny. And kinda weird." She seems to be looking anywhere but his face, and for once, he's grateful. "He is cool."

"Cool." Dream winces at the soft break in his voice.

She clears her throat in pity at the sound. "Are... are you guys, like—"

"No," he rushes, eyes wide with surprise. "I mean, nope. No. We're just—friends."

The word feels wrong in his mouth, like embers of truth desperately coated with sand. Yet it isn't a lie, they *aren't* more than friends. They're not supposed to be.

He watches his sister frown. "Oh."

Dream tries to not think about her confusion at his answer, after she'd been with them all day, and came to a wildly different conclusion. He wishes he was unfeeling enough to blame it on her naivety. They are quiet for a moment more.

"I'm going to go now," he says.

She smiles at him dryly as he retreats down the yard. "Don't crash."

His head is still buzzing from the sight of the porch lights during the drive home. The warm ambiance illuminated his sister's face; how her mouth formed around George's name as it fell with quiet approval.

Her words continue to echo in his head. Dream finds himself again wishing he could see through the eyes of someone other than himself. He is painfully aware that his own expressions and words make his heart obvious—but what was it his sister noticed about George that implies the same affection? Is she right? Was it real?

*Did I miss it?*

Traffic lights glide over the windshield as he pulls up to a vacant intersection. Red flicks for the opposite, empty lanes. The cold weight of his phone rests against his thigh, recently disconnected by Sapnap from the charging port. As he accelerates again, it mindlessly slips to the side, and clatters below his seat.

"Nice going," Sapnap mutters against the passenger door, face glowing white from his own screen.

Dream lifts his eyes to the mirror. "George, can you reach it?"

"Uh, yeah." George ducks down briefly in the dark of the car.

The sleek device is passed over the left side of Dream's seat and the corner nudges his shoulder. He overestimates the distance when he reaches to retrieve it, fingers settling over George's knuckles, and stalling at the mistake.

The contact lingers for longer than it has to. His retreat is curiously slow, testing the passing seconds, and he feels George's fingers jump slightly to graze his. The touch severs as Dream pulls

his phone back in front of him.

“Thanks,” he mutters, but the nerves on his hands are burning bright.

George says nothing. The car ride continues in silence, save Sapnap’s music and distracted huffs at his phone in the corner. Dream counts the passing dashes on the road and tries not to think.

He fails.

Their day replays continuously in his tumbling mind; glances, touches, and secrets that fill a hope too warm to be alive in autumn. He squints at the fuzzy lights on the road as if they hold his memories. In the sharp, gleaming refractions, he dares to imagine straying outside of the lines they’ve created. He dares to imagine that given the opportunity, George would follow him.

Music floats between enclosed windows in their liminal space as he chases a small inkling of an idea.

Dream wraps a large palm firmly on the steering wheel, holding it steady, and lets his other hand fall away. He holds his breath between the beats of a song.

Asphalt crunches beneath his tires. The beams from his headlights only illuminate so far into the darkness.

He slides his forearm between his chair and the car door as he slowly reaches behind his seat. Close enough to seal the offer in secrecy, but obvious enough for George’s eyes, he cranes his hand.

Danger climbs in the black silence; street lamps glow on his open fingers. His hand waits for any sign of life.

*Reach back, he wishes, eyes lost on the road. Please, reach back.*

After a moment, his headrest tilts forward with the pressure of George leaning against it. He hears a low exhale whisper from behind him.

George’s fingers are gentle, and slow, when they quietly slide into his.

## Chapter End Notes

okay to be real I don't really like disney, and writing a chapter about it was tough so I am relieved for it to be completed :) this shift in the story really does feel like a weight off of my shoulders, probably because of the length of this upload as well since it unsettles me to realize just how much I've written, but hopefully the payoff is worth it! I had a lot of fun with this chapter. holdin' hands on a late night drive sounds like progress to me folks. big thanks to the beta reader for this chapter, zach :) and to ari for all the detailed disney info lol

on another note, I can't thank you enough for all the supportive comments I've received. you all gave me such great advice and comfort that really helped a lot with continuing to this upload. my approach is still relatively the same, chapter by chapter basis, but I'm gonna try to tough it out <3 love you all



## Return

### Chapter Summary

Unable to rest, Dream turns the longest day of his life into an even longer night.

### Chapter Notes

Hi hi, another loooong chapter here. Hope you're doing well.

Please don't be weird about stuff to CC's, don't crosspost my work, be nice to each other, y'all know the drill. Happy June update!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream's journal entry is bare.

Speckles of ink dot his fingertips as he bounces the pen from knuckle to knuckle. The skin between joints has grown red from twenty minutes of his restlessness. Hair damp on his ears, knee rattling against the desk's underside—blank pages continue to taunt him with the dread of filling them.

It's been half an hour since he stepped out of the bathroom steam. He was the last in the house to rinse off a long day of walking and layering grime. The shower was good to him, evening out the low plunge in his stomach, formed when George's hand finally slipped away.

It's been nearly two hours since Dream held it in his own.

His eyes drift over the lineless pages again. Writing down the insurmountable memory would mean the moment has truly passed; so long as his words continue to fail him, it stretches on as a secret, forever theirs.

He's never felt more undone than by the simplicity of George's hands. Fingers tangling together, warm skin brushing callouses, only broken by flashes of green lights and clicking blinkers. He'd been terrified that George wouldn't be there when he reached back from every turn, but their hands reslotted without fail. In the seconds they were apart, Dream's avid desperation grew; to sink further, grasp again, feel more. He dared to clasp George's knuckles tighter. George enclosed Dream's hand with both palms in return, pressed to either side, trapping him in overheating surprise.

The synapses on Dream's wrist fired endlessly for minutes at a time. George's touch trailed up his skin lightly, dipped down to trace his veins, making his breath grow faint and eyes want to wander from the headlight glow.

He replays their silent goodbye to the empty journal on his desk.

Clutching his black pen, he mimics the feeling of squeezing George's fingertips when they withdrew. Fleeting nails scraped Dream's palm, he thought he heard someone breathe, "Wait," but

then the car doors opened and reality rushed them again.

Dream's throat tightens. His eyes drift to his closed bedroom door.

*Is holding you supposed to hurt?*

He sinks his pen to the paper once more, and nothing but ragged scratches come out. His head has bled his own thoughts dry. A frustrated sigh passes over the chapped tears in his lips.

*You*, he writes.

“No,” Dream mutters, and he runs a dark line through the word.

*I*, he scrawls instead.

In his weeks of journaling, doodling, falling asleep with a cheek pressed to fresh ink—he’s been guiding himself away from one-sided conversations. He huffs at the waiting word. “Better.”

*I*, he continues, with a raise of his eyebrows. *Am—*

A sudden vibration traveling across his desk makes him flinch. The pen drops, rolling along to the edge of the page, while he pushes light clutter out of the way. His phone glows with wanted interruption as he tips the screen into view.

After light discussions during their drive home, they’d all decided to turn in early with claims of heat exhaustion. Vaguely surprised he hasn’t passed out already, Dream examines the time, standing with bright numbers at eleven forty-four PM.

A notification from George rests beneath it.

*The photo turned out alright*, the message reads. *Helium is a good look for you.*

Dream’s breath wastes no time to halt in his chest.

George is combing over the picture he took of him in the spare bedroom. He didn’t say much of a goodnight beyond soft mumbles in the hall. He let go of Dream’s hand and failed to meet his eye.

Dream is afraid he scared him, as always. He’s giving George space, as always—yet this text is from two doors down and made of such soothing blues that he could slip and fall without knowing until he’s halfway there.

The keyboard stares back at Dream; he considers shutting off his phone.

His pen rests against the corner of the journal and tumbles to the right when he closes it with caution.

A light inhale draws cool on the front of his teeth as he types, *Have you listened to that song?*

George sends back a simple question mark.

Dream ignores the half-jump in his pulse at the quickness of George’s response, and hunts for an embedded link to reply with. He watches the music icon go through, then expand in their thread, eating half of his screen with familiar pinks and purples.

*Oh right*, George says. *I remember it from the album a while ago.*

George doesn't talk about music much with Dream, and he's never asked why. Over the years, he's marked it down to a difference in taste, or reluctance to share what's personal. For George to acknowledge the song that derailed his airport drive feels more private than it should.

*It was playing when we went to pick you up*, Dream texts before his hands fall ragged around the device. He meant to type and delete it, not *send* it—and drops his phone on the desk to free his insidious fingers.

The car ride from days prior feels so far from him now. He'd been worried to see George in the terminal, and after holding his hand in the dark of their drive, he's more concerned with where they'll land tomorrow. How soon is too soon to ask George to never leave Florida?

Dream scowls at the thought as quickly as it comes, and he hears another buzz.

*Were you nervous to see me?* George asks.

Quickly, he scoops up his phone and shoots back, *Hell yeah I was*. His leg resumes bouncing underneath the desk as a moment of nonresponse stretches between them. *Were you?*

A simple question should garner a simpler answer, especially considering who he's conversing with. The discomfort in his stomach grows as he watches George's typing bubble hover for a while.

*I lied about customs*, George's message reads when it finally appears. *It actually went by really fast. I was running behind cause I had to catch my breath in the lavatory for a bit. Became good friends with the automatic toilets.*

Dream lifts the screen closer to his face to reread it slowly.

The sincerity of George's words begins to tangle in him. While he was tearing himself apart and refusing to drive, George was hurting, too. The revelation doesn't deliver any relief, and all he wants is to hold him close.

*I heard the song and had to pull over because it reminded me of you*, Dream confesses to his keyboard. He presses *send* with his eyes squeezed shut.

He's pushing his luck. Their day of terrifying rides and sharing photos that ended with him learning what George's fingertips feel like should encourage him to back off, before he's out of time.

Vibrations skitter across the curves of his palms, and his eyes peak open.

*Check Discord*, George says.

Dream discards his phone for his computer mouse in seconds. After a series of rapid clicking and waiting for the off-purple icon to load, he sees the message sitting in his inbox.

George sent him an emboldened link to a Spotify party for the song. Above the green invitation, it reads, *Do you want to listen with me?*

Dream's heart is tossed haphazardly into his throat. He rolls closer to his keyboard, fingers frantically pecking letters as he types, *Yes, definitely, let me get my headphones.*

Shoving tufts of hair away from his ears, he cushions his hearing with the familiar headset. The silence of his room is muffled; his cursor hovers over the link where he can see George is waiting.

*It's just a song*, he attempts to convince himself, but the thought is let out in a sigh. *No, it's not.*

He lowers his fingertip on the mouse and presses “*join*.”

The application kick-starts on his monitors, and familiar notes float between his ears, biding time before he collapses inward again. His jaw tightens as he braces himself for the impact of what stalled him on the sunny road.

9:09

The sound of a Discord message conjoins with the song.

*Kinda like 404*, it says.

A soft smile presses Dream’s lips together. *Do you have the lyrics open?* he asks.

*Maybe*, George replies.

Dream can hear his heartbeat growing louder behind the swirling chords as they continue. Wrists resting on the desk, his hands are suspended over the keys, filled with uncertainty.

*One more time*,

*this puppy love is out of line*

Not a moment later, George reiterates, *Puppy love*.

Dream’s fingertips glide carefully, sink down on three letters, and he sends, *Yes*.

*Cute*, George notes.

His face warms, eyes tracing over the familiarity of George’s multicolored icon, how their names descend in a stack that stretches on for hours of their lives. He sees George typing before the rest of the lines begin to fall around them, and the username disappears.

*I'm falling now but it's so wrong*

*You talk like a man and taste like the sun*

*You lift your eyes up from the dust*

*I knew just then I knew it was done*

Dream knows what it sounds like; what it reads like. From the glow of his computer screens and lamp light spilling across the floor, he imagines the sounds carrying, slipping under their door frames, and entangling in the hall between rooms like a tiptoeing ghost.

*I want you more*, the song echoes.

His eyes flutter shut, listening to *blue, balloons, rain*.

A message chimes in his headphones. Above the sight of George’s typing status rapidly blinking in and out of existence, the notification simply reads, *This*.

Dream wants to think George is as wide-eyed as he once was. He hopes George is breathless, fingers stalled on his laptop keys, brows drawn together in the upturned way that means he is

letting himself *feel*.

Dream reads over the word. *This, this, this.*

*Yeah*, he responds.

The music carries on.

*I just can't build on something that begins like this*

*Is a blood diamond flawless but for that one thing?*

Though the familiar ache in his chest remains as the end grows near, Dream realizes the crushing weight he'd been afraid of never arrives. Gratitude for George's company, though silent, blooms in its place.

*Is sad*, George types finally as wavering lyrics blend into soft noise. *This is sad.*

Dream's heart feels bare. He can't help but press knuckles into his sternum as he repeats, *Yeah*.

The song fades with the outro and is paused on George's end before the final seconds tick by. Sudden silence makes Dream swallow thickly.

*Do you want to listen to something else?* George asks, but the offer seems to reflect the hesitancy Dream is swimming in.

*Honestly*, he types, *I just want to talk to you.*

His candidness waits unanswered. Faint panic stirs behind Dream's tired eyes as he considers how to take a step back.

*You can say no*, Dream adds frantically. *I know it's been a long day, I'm just going to be up for a bit but if you aren't then that is fine, you don't have to keep responding.*

He feels a twinge of relief at providing them both with a safety net—the offer of abrupt silence is undoubtedly going to be taken. They'll see each other tomorrow in the safety of daylight and pretend this didn't happen. Dream's shoulders relax back into his chair.

Then, George asks, *Wdym? Talk on call?*

*Oh no that is not what I meant, just like texting or smth*, Dream responds at a pace he didn't know his hands possess. Half a second later, with eyes growing wide, he suggests, *But I'm okay with that if you are.*

Even though he knows George will decline, his heart races anyway. The blunt message comes through to plummet his foolish sense of growing hope.

*I don't think that's a good idea*, it reads.

“Right,” he mutters.

*Right*, he types. *Gn George.*

Dream's palms curl around the edge of his desk as he pushes himself away. The wheels of his chair slide off the thin platform and onto carpet, halting the desired motion. He tugs off his headphones dejectedly.

*Maybe this is good, he thinks. This will humble me. I'll calm the fuck down.*

He stares at the screens for a moment more and watches George's status switch from green to gray. Dread crawls down his spine.

His hands are detached from present motion as they power down his monitors. The screen of his phone is dark, he flicks off the desk lamp to match it, and defeatedly falls in bed.

*Humbling, his mind echoes.*

Bitter familiarity sinks in his bones. He's missed George—his distance, leaving conversations early, forcing him into isolation—so he should be comforted by his undeniable return.

Suffocating mounds of pillows and blankets rise up to his ears as he haggardly pushes them away. Fabric meant to be soothing scratches against his warming skin.

No matter what, George will always be able to do this—push him to a place of hurt, pull his hand away from the steering wheel, and make him more afraid of a nonresponse than crashing on an open road. No amount of talk-therapy can undo how much Dream *cares*.

*Stupid.* Tension creeps in to squeeze at his temples as pinpricks threaten his eyes. *This is stupid. We're making progress, we're moving forward—*

A hot tear slips over clumped lashes and descends on his cheek. His breath locks. He stares at the ceiling as a brimming well forms, distorting the lower edge of his vision, and the tracks on his face begin to smell like the sea.

*We're doing better. I'm doing better.*

As much as he wants it to, holding George's hand can't undo their conversations from early summer. Meaningless emotions shoved past him in rapid succession; mourning for the wishful thinking the day had given him, angry that he let himself believe it, and exhaustion blanketing the in-between.

*It's late, you're tired. Just breathe.*

Dream pulls on the collar of his shirt to wipe moisture from his eyes. Warm breath rebounds on the fabric as a sigh pushes through his lips.

“I’m just tired,” he reprimands gently. “I just need sleep.”

The dark of the night calls to him from the windowsill, and his eyes pass over it slowly. He’s hardly surprised today led him here. He’ll recover by morning, have his weekly session in the afternoon, and move on from it soon enough.

A familiar ringing sound buzzes from a nearby pillow. Dream’s gaze cuts sharply to his face-down phone.

He reaches for it. The bright screen is blurry, but he blinks enough times to make out George’s name.

Confusion turns relief into pain in his tightening throat. He hesitantly presses a thumb to accept the call.

“Hey,” George says into his ear.

The sound of his voice stretches into tense silence. Dream slowly sits up in bed and mutters, “What happened to this being a bad idea?”

“It still is.”

His brows draw together. “Then why...” He lets his words trail into nothingness. He doesn’t *want* to know why, he wants George to stay.

Yet the dampness clinging to his lashes reminds him he knows better.

“If you don’t want to talk to me,” Dream says slowly, “then don’t talk to me. You can’t tell me there’s a—a boundary, say it’s a bad idea, and then expect me to push it like this. It’s too confusing.”

George answers him with immediate silence.

Dream pinches the bridge of his nose. “Okay, wait—I’m... I’m just not feeling great right now. Ignore that.”

“No. You... you have a good point,” George says, “about the boundaries. Can you repeat what you said? I want to make sure I understand.”

His hand slowly lowers from his face. “I just mean that you like to make these boundaries in your head. Which is fine, I do too and I respect that, but you don’t tell me they’re there, George. I don’t know they exist until I’ve suddenly crossed them.” He huffs. “It’s not exactly fair.”

The words feel strange to emerge beyond his session room and onto their phone call. He hopes they’re received well and not lost in the electronic hum.

“And right now,” he continues with uncertainty, “I don’t know if you’ve changed your mind, or are just feeling me out to—to hang up again. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Okay,” George says. “That makes sense to me. I—I don’t mean to do that.” He pauses. “Sometimes I don’t know where my boundaries are either, though. We both find out at the same time.”

Dream’s voice drops suddenly. “Well fuck, George. You have to figure them out yourself. I can’t keep doing it for you.”

Half of him wants to wince at the abrasion in his own words, but the rise and fall of his chest is tattered with release. He’s tired of treating him like fine china; he’s sure George is tired of it too.

“I... am attempting to,” George says slowly. “That’s why I called. I thought I’d feel better if we left it where we did, but as soon as we weren’t talking... I regretted it. Immediately.”

Dream’s gaze softens on his bedroom door. “That quickly?”

“Yeah. Trust me, I’m just as confused as you are.”

An unsteady silence presses into the unmoving house. Dream knows he has to be careful. If he isn’t, tangling darkness and the poor quality of George’s earbuds’ microphone could leave them on worse footing than where they started.

George’s voice is barely audible when it returns. “Can I explain something to you?”

“It’s late,” Dream points out hesitantly. “Are you going to regret it?”

“No.” His answer is firm.

Dream leans back against his headrest and settles an elbow on his knee. “What is it you want to talk about?”

George pauses. “This might take a bit to get it right. Be patient with me.”

Dream’s lips press together as he steals the sudden uptake of his heart. “Okay.”

“Do you ever... tell yourself stories in your head?” George begins. “Of how things happened, what went right or what went wrong—you make this one narrative and stick to it because it feels the closest to the truth.”

Dream exhales lightly. “Like you’re the center of everything, ever. Sure. Everybody does that.”

“Right. And you’re always on the winning side in your story.”

Dream remembers the feel of the landline phone in his palm when he heard his mother say, “*It’s okay to lose.*” A heavy frown sinks across his face. “What’s your story?”

George falls silent for long enough to make Dream tip away the phone and glance at the connected call. The minutes count down closer to tomorrow.

He brings the silence back to his ear. “...George?”

“Mine are all about you,” George answers quietly. “I tell myself... I made the tough decisions. Good decisions. Ones that made sense and left us better off than what *you* wanted.”

Dream can feel his heart beating against the cotton of his t-shirt. “What I wanted,” he mutters. They didn’t speak for weeks because of what *he* wanted.

“I’ve had it in my head for so long,” George continues. “That you never really knew who you were reaching for. That you had it all wrong, that you were the—the...”

Dream’s eyes squeeze shut; his damp lashes threaten to drop leftover tears. “The bad guy?”

“I’m sorry,” George whispers. “Ever since I got here I’ve felt like I’m being unwritten.”

Wind passes by Dream’s window. The dry breeze carries nothing except the strain of his mind to follow along. “Why are you telling *me* this?”

“Because you—you keep doing everything right.” George’s voice is soft enough to braid into the night with inklings of a dream. “It’d be easier if you were an asshole.”

“Easier,” Dream breathes, “to *what*? ”

“I...” From the quiet falter of his voice and sound of his breath shallowing, Dream can tell George is beginning to backtrack.

“Please, don’t go anywhere,” he begs. “Please. Tell me.”

“This isn’t what I meant to say,” George rushes.

Dream sits up. “You said you wouldn’t regret it. You said.”

“That doesn’t—I’m not—I knew I shouldn’t have called, hearing your voice just messes with my

head—”

“You wanted to explain something to me, then *explain it.*” Dream’s fingers push his hair away from his forehead, and his eyes wildly trace the closed door. “Because I still don’t know what you mean. Am I—am I still the bad guy? Do you still hate me?”

“No. No. I’m trying to tell you that I was—” George exhales sharply. “It’s not *easy* for me to be—to be wrong.”

“...Wrong?” The realization lifts off of Dream’s shoulders and widens his surprised eyes. He pulls the blankets to his chest, knuckles and fabric all wrapped into one. “You’re saying your story, the one in your head, about me, has been wrong?”

“Yes,” George utters. “That.”

His eyes fall shut. “George, why didn’t you just *say* that?”

“I *did* say that,” George defends poorly. “You’re just too much of a rectangle to understand.”

“It’s not my fault you talk in riddles like a *bridge* troll.” Dream runs a hand over his face and muffles, “Jesus Christ.”

“...But that makes sense?”

He sighs. “Yes, that makes sense. And I’m glad that you told me. And I’m glad that we’re... better, now.” His words begin to slow. “But can you tell me what ‘I’m doing everything right’ means?”

“You’re proving me wrong, that’s what I mean.”

Dream slides down in his covers defeatedly. It’s a half-truth, and he desperately wants to know what’s underneath.

“What are you so afraid of?” he pushes gently. “It’s just me.”

“Just you,” George says incredulously as though he’d meant for it to land under his breath. He clears his throat.

Dream listens to George’s presence, the occasional shifting of covers, creaking bed frame in the room across the hall. The reminder of their proximity is uneasy knowledge for his head to have.

“I want to talk to you,” George says, “and I don’t want to talk to you.”

Dream’s head reclines into his pillow as his eyes lift to the ceiling. “Okay.”

“I want to see you right now, and I’m dreading even looking at you tomorrow.” The words from George’s mouth flood their call, and recede by his vanishing breath. “Everything you do, Dream, everything you say...”

Dream recognizes the language he’s spent a summer mulling over, and picking apart, only to reconstruct again. His pounding heart ignites in his chest and roars up to his ears.

He presses a hand over his eyes.

“You cut me open.” George’s voice is trembling. “*That’s* what I’m scared of.”

Dream's eyelashes scrape his palm as they fly shut, dragging over the place where George's nails had been. *Me too*, he wants to repeat it until breath escapes him. *Me too, me too, me too*.

"I'm here," is all Dream can say. "I'm still here."

"I know. I know that. But... where are we supposed to go when we open something like this?"

The faint panic growing in the call climbs in Dream's throat. He attempts to clear it, twice. "Where... where did we go last time?"

He tries not to think about how *much* they're dredging up in the dead of night; how their conversations tend to end with one-sided goodbye's, or worse.

"We stopped," George recounts for him. "We got space."

"Space isn't easy when you're right across the hall," he says feebly. "Or when I do stupid things that close it."

"Like when you kiss my forehead." George's voice grows faint. "Or hold my hand, or tell me a sad song reminds you of us, and then..."

Dream sinks further into the pillows and sheets attempting to offer him comfort. "I try to say goodnight."

"And I can't say it back." George exhales sharply. "God, why... why does everything have to be so *much* with us? Why can't holding hands just be holding hands?"

"Should we act like it doesn't mean much?" Dream asks. "Is that what we're supposed to do?"

"You mean tomorrow?" George's pause echoes with disbelief. "Can you really do that?"

"I could pretend." His offer is weak; they both know it. He lets his voice soften. "But you know me. The whole time I'll be thinking about wanting to do it again. About how your... your palms are bigger than I thought they'd be, and how your fingertips felt on my knuckles."

"Yeah," George breathes. "I do know you."

Dream swallows thickly. "Okay," he says. "Okay. Now I get why this was a bad idea."

"Should we hang up?"

He swearls the air in his bedroom slows to a stifling halt, curtains laid still, fan unmoving on the ceiling slant. George said, "We." Not "I" or "you," but "we."

"That is the last thing I want," Dream confesses with clarity.

"But it's late."

He checks the time. "It is. It will only get later. And we'll only get more tired."

"And more stupid," George adds in a rush. His words are clipped with a familiar shortness of breath Dream can't decipher to be panic or anticipation.

"I like it when you're stupid," he says.

His desperation earns a half-laugh from George's mouth. The sound is frantic, but warm, giving

way to him muttering, “I’m not sure what—what this is, right now.”

“Does it have to be something?” Dream asks in earnest. His pulse drums against the skin of his throat. “Can’t it just be us?”

He imagines George in bed, knees pulled to his chest, fingers pinched around the earbud cord as he contemplates what he’s been given. A similar feeling rises in Dream; he flexes his hand in the wish of holding George’s again. For the first time in weeks, a strange confidence resides in his reaching that there’s no chance it’ll go unanswered.

“Y—yeah,” George says finally. “I’m okay with that.”

Flames of surprise lick up his throat anyway, and he whispers, “You are?”

“I am.”

His bed feels warm. The pounding in his skull reverbs until he takes calm breaths to ease it away. The night feels liminal like their car ride had been; secretive, fond, and promising.

*This is not a promise, he reminds himself carefully. This is only now. But I’ll take however many ‘nows’ I can get.*

“I’ve missed you,” Dream says. “Every day you’re here, I feel like I miss you a little less.”

“It’s... hard to recognize you,” George agrees gently. “I know in my head that the person I hear on the phone like this is the same as the one two doors away, but... I still need to be reminded, sometimes.”

“Here’s your reminder, then.” He tries to clear the rising unease in his gut by joking softly, “I’m only two doors away.”

George’s voice is barely a whisper. “I’m very aware of that right now.”

Dream’s jaw tips up sharply to keep the sound of his exhale away from the mic. He quickly wets his lips where they’ve run dry in the past tumble of minutes. “It’s—it’s weird to hear your voice and tell myself you’re not across the ocean.” George huffs, and he continues, “I keep looking at the call and calculating the time zones on accident.”

“What time is it for me?” George asks.

“It’s five in England,” he answers without pause. “Eleven in Texas. And... seven in Greece.”

“Oh.” George’s question is kindled with amusement. “What’s in Greece?”

Dream’s face grows warm. “A lot of things.”

A silence full of possibility hums between them. By the time George speaks again, Dream is already reaching for his tangle of earbuds resting on his nearby nightstand.

“Maybe... maybe I should stay on the phone,” George says, “and you can tell me all about it.”

A soft smile lifts across Dream’s face.

“Is that alright?” he asks quietly.

“That is more than alright,” Dream answers.

He sorts out his mess of cords, redirects the fuzzy audio to his earbuds, and rests his phone against his thigh. A lifetime of summers leap to escape his parted lips. In the darkness of his room, he thinks of mediterranean sun, how he surely had this conversation with George years ago, and they're both pretending to ignore the monument of its return.

“Okay, George.” He draws in a steady breath. “What do you know about Thebes?”

“Wait, I thought Aphrodite was his wife?”

Dream frowns. “I don’t think so. It has been a bit since I read it, but I’m pretty sure it was Charis.”

“I could’ve sworn it was her, though,” George mumbles. “Wasn’t it how they kept the other gods from trying to fight over her?”

He reslots a pillow behind his back with a puzzled grin. “How did you know that?”

Their conversation has drifted to and fro from the original intention of the call, looping in areas, dragging low in others, to ultimately fall back to musings about myths. Anytime Dream’s head aches from the regurgitation of buried knowledge, he listens to the soothing flow of George’s voice in his earbuds and all complaints are washed away.

“I was taught that one in primary school,” George admits finally, and Dream lets out a gasp of fake offense. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. I just wanted to hear you tell it.”

“Did I do a good job?” he asks.

“Yes.” George’s voice quiets with honesty. “I could listen to you talk for hours.”

Dream hums contentedly. He’s not sure when and he’s not sure why, but somewhere in their soft exchange of words, the night has permitted them clemency. He even called George’s handwriting “*pretty*” after a fifteen minute tangent on Greek scribes, and all he received was a dismissive “*calm down*” instead of protective anger.

“Well.” Dream tips his phone off of his chest to glance over the digital clock. “You sorta have already. Guess what time it is.”

“Um, I dunno. One-thirty?”

Dream smiles and reads, “Two fifty-three.”

“Oh my god,” George says in an exhale. “We’ve been on call for *three hours*?” They dissipate into laughter clipped by the quality of cheap microphones. “No wonder my brain feels like jelly.”

“Mhm.” Dream stretches his spine, muscles complaining silently at the release. “Welcome to my world.”

Another pause settles. “Alright,” George says habitually. “Tell me another one.”

“I’m all out,” Dream admits. “You’ve drained me. I have nothing left. I’m soulless.”

“I think you mean liver-less.”

He shakes his head as a light chuckle rises in his chest. “That’s not funny.”

“Then why—” George breaks to presumably hide his own amusement. “Why are you laughing?”

“Cause I’m *tired*, George,” Dream feigns.

“Me too,” George says dismissively. “Be tired with me.”

Dream’s heavy eyelids fall shut in search of a thread to follow. No stories come to mind, and he feels himself sinking deeper into the mattress.

“Hey.” A sharp snapping sound on the call jolts his consciousness back into his body. “I can hear you falling asleep.”

Dreams yawns. “No you can’t.”

An irritated sigh passes through his earbuds. “Fine.” George’s voice softens. “Y’think I should go now?”

“No,” he drawls, then clears the drowsy rumble from his throat. “No. I’m up, I promise.”

“I’m a little offended I’m not entertaining you enough,” George jokes.

“If you’re that mad about it, then come in here and wake me up yourself.” Dream’s eyes fly open as his words catch up to his tattered brain. The comfort they’d explored over the duration of the call is no match for his exhausted filter. A pitiful grimace rises with his shoulders, and he mutters, “Oh god.”

“Why,” George says, “did you have to say that?”

Dream winces. “I know, it—it just came out. My head is mush right now, okay? I’m sorry.” The silence he hears nauseates him further. “George? Can we move on from it?”

It was a joke from the genesis of his dark room, conspiring with the cold pillows against his skin and the stillness of the night. Dream hasn’t glanced at his imagination in ages; he’s sure now is the worst time to let it run free.

*Maybe*, a dangerous flicker in his chest tells him, *George is thinking about it, too.*

“Alright,” George says finally. “Talk about something else.”

“Great,” Dream breathes. “Um. You... you said your Disney pictures turned out pretty good, right?”

“They’re okay.” George’s voice lightens slightly. “Mostly because your stupid teeth aren’t in them.”

“You are so mean,” Dream says fondly.

“I’m an artist, Dream. Sorry that your pearly whites aren’t a part of my *vision*.”

He reclines back into his throne of pillows. “Is not letting anyone else see your work also a part of your vision?”

George clicks his tongue playfully. Dream smiles.

“I showed it to you.”

“Are you forgetting that I forcefully experienced near-death to see that photo?” Dream teases, though faint tremors of fear trickle in at the memory of the watery plunge. He gave the copy of the on-ride picture to his sister, for the sake of his mom, but saved a quick snapshot of it on his phone. It’s a nice secret to have.

“I am *not* forgetting that,” George says. “Considering I received a broken hand from sitting next to you.”

Dream’s worry tumbles out of him in a rush. “I *knew* you were still hurt. You kept rubbing your hand and—god, I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

“I am joking,” George enunciates. “I am fine. You can relax.” He huffs. “You’re such a baby.”

In an attempt to hide the relief that floods him, Dream defends, “A baby with a death grip, apparently.”

“Yeah, yeah,” George dismisses as his voice floats away in absent musing, “your grip *is* really strong.”

Any words of response come to a flat halt on the tip of Dream’s tongue. Between the buzzing static of their frayed phone call and the casual uptake of George’s breath, he swears he caught a note of *intrigue* in his voice.

“Oh.” Dream does his best to lock the revelation away. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” A soft stutter resounds in George’s breath when he quietly adds, “It’s... nice.”

Dream stares helplessly at the ceiling with wide eyes. “Nice,” he repeats.

“Safe,” George attempts instead.

The distraction doesn’t work. “You still think my hands are nice.”

“I’m not going to get started on your hands,” George breathes.

“Oh my god.” Dream’s back lifts upright from his pillows in seconds. “*Please* do.”

Nervous laughter floats from George’s end at his desperation. “I am *not* sleep deprived enough for that.”

Dream’s teeth sink into the interior of his cheek. His eyes fall to where his “*nice*” hands toy anxiously with the blankets over his thighs.

Their words tumbled together so quickly he can’t perceive what was real, or what his tired mind inspired from his dreams. He knows that friends don’t do this. He wishes he had it in him to *be* the bad guy, to push George’s obvious reluctance—but he knows friends don’t do that, either.

“Fine,” Dream says with a sigh. “I guess I’ll have to keep you up all night until you are.”

“Yeah.” He hears the curve of a soft smile in George’s words. “I guess you will.”

Later in the night when Dream hears George’s delirious giggles trickling through the phone line, a grin settles on his face.

“Are you sleep deprived enough yet?” he badgers, for arguably the third time in the past hour.

“What?” Once the recollection dawns on him, George groans. “No. Stop asking me, that defeats the point—”

He’s cut off by the breathiness of Dream’s laughter. “Come on,” Dream pleads. “I’m starving here. You have to throw me a bone.”

“I throw you so many bones,” George says flatly. “You chew through them all. You’re a dog and I hate you.”

He wheezes. “Gimme another one. C’mon, George. Please.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I can hear your smile,” Dream teases.

“I know what yours looks like now,” George counters.

His eyebrows raise. “You sure about that? The only picture you have of me you can’t even see my teeth.”

“You have teeth?” George backtracks, “Wait, why do we—we *keep* talking about teeth. This is like the—” His amusement pitches between words. “*Fifth* time, why?”

“I don’t know,” Dream forces out with a winded sigh. “I’m so fuckin’ tired. I think we’ve gone crazy.”

“Maybe I’ve gone crazy,” George muffles, “but you’ve *always* been crazy.”

“Okay, weirdo. Stop talking into your pillow.”

Dream leans onto his side to reach a glass bottle of water on his nightstand. Laying around and talking for hours has been surprisingly exhausting, slowly damaging their sanity, and stripping enamel from his teeth.

He frowns while taking a sip. “I just thought about teeth again. Maybe we should be concerned.”

“You do—” George yawns into the mic. “You do have very white ones.”

“Thank you,” he says warmly.

“They match your house.”

Dream slides the bottle back onto the stand. “Thank you?”

He hears a ruffling of fabric before George’s voice suddenly excels in clarity. “I bet if I zoom in on the photo, I’ll be able to see them.”

“No you can’t.” Dream hears the gentle clack of keys from George’s laptop. “Oh my god. Don’t actually try—”

A hoard of dramatic clicks puncture the call’s audio; he rolls his eyes. “I see it! Right there,” George exclaims. “Dream face reveal.”

“You *can’t*,” Dream says knowingly.

George pauses. “I’m going to tweet it.”

“No you’re—” He laughs. “You’re *not*. You hardly showed *one* picture to me, George. You can’t expect me to believe you’d show it to *hundreds of thousands of*—”

“Let me just attach some text here,” George mumbles dismissively. “Almost...”

The skin of his cheeks feel warm from the strain of his reluctant grin. “You’re such a little liar.”

His phone has been resting dormant on the pillow next to his ear, and he flinches at the sudden vibration. He picks it up in confident disbelief.

Under the telltale blue notification from Twitter, it reads: *GeorgeNotFound has tagged you in a photograph.*

“*George!*” he yells.

“*I heard that!*” George laughs loudly. “I heard that through the—the *wall*, oh my god!”

“You didn’t,” Dream rushes, opening the tweet on his screen. “There’s no way you—” His eyes fall over the picture as their conjoined laughter slowly fades away. “...Did.”

The numbers beneath the tweet climb with passing blurs of outrageous approval. There is no joke, no catch, just Dream with a balloon securing his anonymity. He can see where George’s editing added a darker contrast to his clothes, and a more vibrant blend of orange and pinks than the sky originally had above them.

His eyes are drawn to himself behind the mouse-eared balloon. All of him is held in the slope of his shoulders, hoards of bag straps pinned across them, and the brittle string in his hand that his fingers wrap around with delicacy.

He looks inviting. He looks intimidating.

“*It feels like me,*” Dream breathes in confusion. The caverns of his heart expand in his chest the longer his eyes explore it.

*How can I be looking at a mirror if my face isn’t in it?*

“I... wanted to capture that.” Any trace of lightheartedness in George’s voice has vanished during their silence. “Before I force myself to forget it.”

A weight drops in Dream’s stomach as his thumb lowers to like the image. “Why would you?”

“I’m leaving, Dream,” George reminds him. They haven’t talked about it; Dream doesn’t want to *think* about it.

“In a week,” he defends.

“Yeah,” George says gently, “in a week.”

“A week can be a while.” His eyes flit up to the text above the image when George doesn’t respond, and he huffs. “I... I just noticed your caption. You’re so stupid.”

*Dreams come true*, it says.

“I couldn’t help it.”

“It’s such a dumb slogan,” Dream mumbles.

“I think there’s some truth to it,” George disagrees lightly. “Whatever you dream about at night comes true eventually.”

He lays his phone on his chest. “Really? My dreams don’t.”

“Mine do,” George says, and his voice softens. “You made sure of that in the kitchen.”

Dream’s breath catches. In the dark shadows of his room, he silently runs his knuckles over his bottom lip, chasing memories of George’s closeness. Comparing dreams coming true between soft whispers is bound to give him too much leave.

He tries to warn him. “I don’t think you should talk about this with me.”

“Because of your nightmares?” George pushes.

“Because of when you’re in them,” he admits breathlessly. The night slips down his throat. “I kiss you in every one.”

The intake of George’s breath cuts through the call. “Every...” His voice trails away.

If Dream closes his eyes, he can imagine the sound of the lagoon lapping a darkened shore. He’s sure the confession comes as no surprise to George, given the quiet way he’s explained the dream without ever reaching its center.

The silence of the call builds between their shallowing breaths. Dream’s gaze floats to his bedroom door; he imagines sand slipping in from the hall.

“Maybe I—” George’s voice nearly disappears. “Maybe I’ve dreamt of that, too.”

Dream’s exhale shakes as it passes over the warmth of his lips. His tongue grows heavy in his mouth with the weight of George’s confession.

*Maybe I should’ve kissed you in the airport, then, he could say. Or kissed you in the rain. Or yesterday. Or now.*

He lets himself imagine it. In every instance of wishful words leading him to George’s door—of pulling him in, and tangling hands, and careening his breath away—the drawback comes with it. Having him close enough only for George to never speak to him again; stepping on invisible toes and being berated for his recklessness.

“I think you’re lying,” Dream says gently. “You would never let me.”

“I think,” George mutters, “we should stop talking about this.”

He runs a hand over his face. “Yeah, yeah. We should.”

As they both fall silent again, Dream’s fingers slide to find a pulse in his ribcage. The rhythm is steady, unweighted, almost in relief that he didn’t have to drag them out of the tumbling conversation alone.

Eventually, when he’s on the cusp of blinking into sleep, George voices, “Dream?”

“Hm?”

“It’s... light outside.” George’s voice trails with wonder, and Dream’s eyes float over to his closed curtains. “Look.”

Slivers of white and blue peek out from the sides of his window. Dream slowly sits up and tugs open the drapes. His view of the street and cars outside is clear in the soft shade of dawn, with clouds illuminated by the sky’s premonition of sun.

“We’ve been talking all night?” he questions in disbelief.

“Yeah. It’s like we accidentally re-synced our old sleep schedule.”

“I think that means we are married,” Dream says. “Like when you sneeze at the same time, or match—”

“Swings on the playground, yes, we’ve talked about this before.”

He blinks in adjustment to the new light flooding his room. It sheds across the tangle of sheets he didn’t truly sink into and paints his skin a pale hue.

“We could go to a playground right now,” Dream proposes.

“I don’t think so.”

“We could go get food,” he tries again. “Do you want breakfast? Are you hungry?”

“Uh.” To his surprise, George admits, “Kind of, actually.”

Dream slings his legs over to the side of his bed, and for the first time in hours, his feet hit the soft carpet below. “Do you want to go?” he repeats excitedly.

“...Right now?”

“Yeah,” Dream says, rising out of his bed. “Yeah, why not?”

A woozy rush glides through him once he’s standing. His body reminds him with faint aches and pops that he’s ignored his comfort and appetite for the sound of George’s voice.

“Well, Sapnap is probably...” George neglects to finish.

*Asleep*, Dream realizes he was going to say, then realizes *why* he didn’t care to give sound to it. The hunt for food and bleary-eyed drive would be shared by the two of them, only, alone after a night of too close murmurs.

Dream lowers to sit back on his bed.

Then, George says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” His hands reach for the discarded sweatpants on the floor in seconds. “Like, okay, we’ll go?”

He hears George giggle. “Let me put some socks on.”

A smile blooms on his face as they pass quiet shuffles of fabric over the call, phones audibly juggled in a hurry to get dressed.

Dream disconnects his earbuds in the middle of applying deodorant and brings his phone to his ear.

“Are you hungry for anything in particular, or?”

George hums. “Pancakes sound good.”

They both seem to be moving and speaking quicker than their mouths and movements can catch up to their brains. Though the sun is rising, Dream feels that his better judgement is certainly not rising with it.

“Wonderful,” Dream says breathlessly, connecting his free hand to the door handle. “I know just the place.”

“Is it IHOP?” George asks.

He tugs the door open. “It might be IHOP.”

“I thought Sapnap said to never trust a place that’s open twenty-four-seven.”

“He just hates Orlando,” Dream defends as he steps down the hall.

“Okay, well, I guess we should defer to your better—” The door to George’s room flies open before Dream’s raised hand can knock. Inches away from Dream’s knuckles, halted in the doorway, George completes in a breath, “...Judgement.”

Dream’s hand slowly lowers to his side as his heart climbs into his throat.

They’ve been on call for hours before, left to get food in matching trips to kitchens or cars, but never in the same house and sharing the same air. Yet George stands before him, an apparition of a dream, in oversized t-shirt and fuzzy pajama bottoms.

Under the gentle glow from the hall skylight, everything from the fluff of George’s hair to the sharp curve of his jaw looks soft. His earbuds run cords from his neck, to his elevated palm, where Dream’s name blinks across the screen.

The rise and fall of his chest is hypnotic. After a night of endless talk, neither of them move or speak in the revealing light.

Dream nervously tips his phone closer to his mouth and says, “Hey.”

George mimics him into his earbuds’ mic. “Hi.” The sound of his voice is doubled by the sudden change in proximity of their ongoing call.

He leans back to better observe George in the hallway. “I like your pajamas,” he says.

George’s gaze lifts up high. “I like your bedhead.”

“Gotta sleep for it to be bedhead,” Dream counters, pulling his screen away from his face to observe it. “And we’ve been on call for... six hours.”

He watches George shift his phone in his hand and take a screenshot of the duration. His thumb then presses the disconnecting button mercilessly.

“Why’d you do that?” Dream asks. George glances at him in confusion. “The picture, dummy.”

He shrugs. “Feels like it matters.”

Dream smiles at him and lets his head float into dizzy warmth. “What are we... doing, again?”

George's eyebrows raise. "We're getting breakfast, you goldfish. Did not sleeping seriously break your brain that much?"

"No," Dream defends. "You're just distracting."

He grins when George immediately turns towards the stairs. "Lower your voice."

Louder, Dream says, "Or what?"

He earns a shove to the shoulder. George points in the direction of Sapnap's room. "You're gonna wake him up, stupid. Is that what you want?"

An uncontrolled giggle slips from Dream's lips and he stifles it poorly when George nudges him again. "No, no, no," he attempts to assure.

George grins. "You sure? Because we can always invite him." He moves towards Sapnap's door. "Hey Nicho—"

Dream's fingers shoot out to grasp George's elbow, tugging him back. "Cut it out," he half-whispers, pushing George's laughing frame towards the stairs. "And let's go."

His hands stay on George's shoulders as they make ground across the hall. Beneath his shirt fabric, George is warm, and the sharp protrusions of his collarbones and shoulder blades nearly disappear under Dream's palms.

"Get off of me," George demands, and the lack of fire behind his lowered voice reboots Dream's numbed mind.

"You're helpless," Dream says fondly. He glances at their feet to avoid stepping on George's heels.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeh."

"Then what if I just—" George stops in his tracks once the stairs are in view, and his back slams into Dream's chest.

Dream's eyes blow wide. His hands detached from George's shoulders at the first sign of resistance, and now his elbows hang awkwardly around them, while George's head is trapped neatly under his chin. From the low waistband of his sweatpants to the rise of his collarbones, his body is saturated with the one pressed against him.

The hall is tossed into a silent standstill. George's upper back is tense and unmoving against Dream's ribs. His exhales glide across the top of George's hair, sifting brunet strands, mingling smells of shampoo and floating dust.

"Th—this is close," Dream breathes.

"I didn't—" George clears his throat faintly. "I didn't really think this through."

He hasn't moved despite his rigidity. George's closeness lingers, like it has all night on call, and Dream dares to not let it slip them by.

Slowly, he shifts his arms around George's shoulders and encloses him in a hug from behind.

George leans back into it. His hands raise to connect gently with Dream's forearms as they're pinned across his chest.

"You were supposed to push me away," George says breathlessly. The soft vibration of his words runs across Dream's sternum.

He can't help but chuckle softly, jostling the frame in his arms, and he murmurs into his hair, "Why the hell would I do that?"

George tips his head back. Dream looks down at the soft flush in his smile.

"I really do want some pancakes," George whispers.

"Okay." Dream lets him go reluctantly. "Let's get you some pancakes."

Early morning light passes through dusty windows in the silent diner. Workers on their opening shifts mull about the empty booths and disappear to the steaming kitchen, while Dream and George stutter over the menu's options again.

George tips the plastic sheet towards Dream and points to an option on the bottom, labelled "*funny face pancake*."

A laugh that could quickly become hysterical slips from his lips, and although George joins him, Dream is forced to remember the kind woman taking their order standing outside the booth.

"And the—the—"

"Funny face," she iterates for Dream slowly, writing down on the notepad in hand. "Got it."

Dream collects their menus and hands them to her with an apologetic smile. "Really sorry again that took so long. We—" George giggles again to his left, and he pushes his shoulder lightly. "We haven't slept."

He watches the waitress' eyes widen. "Oh. Well, I'll be back with your other drinks in a bit if you need anything else."

As she leaves their table, Dream's confusion gives way to a face-full of blush. George lands a blow on his shoulder.

"Great job," he whispers. "Now she thinks we were doing something *else* all night."

Dream's humiliation quickly turns into a grin. "Hey, I mean, what she doesn't know won't kill her." He blocks the second shove that comes his way. "Besides, why do you care what a stranger thinks about you anyway?"

George reclines back into the booth. "I don't care," he says.

"You do, too."

His eyes pass over Dream's face in defiance. "I don't care about anything."

"Yeah?" Dream tips his head. "Then why are you looking at my mouth?"

The glare George gives him is murderous. Dream is surprised his insides don't combust under the

weight of it to splatter the egg-white diner walls. He lifts up his water cup in a confident sip.

“I can’t believe you said that to me,” George mutters. “You’re the one who practically has your eyes *glued* to my backside anytime we go up the stairs.”

Dream chokes. He hastily coughs on the water, and splutters, “I do—do *not*.”

When George attempts to pat his back in condescension, Dream elbows him off. The flare in his cheeks refuses to die down even when George half-apologizes between laughter, and he’s relieved when the waitress reappears to deposit their drinks on the table.

He lifts up the warm ceramic of his hot chocolate, and ignores when George tries to say, “You should—” Dream takes a sip and flinches immediately. “Wait.”

He lowers the mug back to the table dejectedly. “I bum ma tongue.”

George shakes his head. “You’re such an idiot.”

He nudges his cup of orange juice towards Dream. After being scorched by a beverage as sweet as cocoa, the juice pales sharply in comparison. He winces. “Gross.”

“It’s not too bad,” George muses. He wipes the lip of the glass with a napkin. “By the way, what is up with Sapnap? He insisted we buy juice but I haven’t seen him drink any of it.”

The reminder pushes Dream away from the raw sting on his taste buds. “Oh my god, okay.” He sits up. “So. I have this theory.”

George smiles at him. “What is your theory?”

Another waitress sets down a pitcher of water before them. Dream tosses her a quick “*thank you*,” and catches how she lingers for a moment after he’s smiled back.

“Um.” He blinks and refocuses on George as she leaves. “Right. The theory, so—” He hears light chatter begin by the cook’s window, and sees their two hostesses conversing. “Have you noticed anything weird with the waiters?”

When George’s gaze swivels to see them, they glance away. “No, why?”

Dream scowls. “They keep looking over here and laughing.”

“Ignore it,” George says simply.

“No, I—I wanna know why.”

Dream’s attention is glued to them for a moment longer, before he feels his hand picked up carefully from the leather seat. His breath stutters to a halt as George’s fingers carefully tangle with his own.

George’s expression looks the same as it had before, but his voice drops. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Every worry held in Dream’s mind rushes out to leave a hollow, wind-blown canyon of his heartbeat resounding, quiet touches dragging from fingertips; George’s palm pressed flush against his. He feels the warmth spread from their clasp up his wrist and elbow until his whole arm is tingling.

“What was I—” He lets out a breath as George’s thumb brushes over his. “Talking about?”

George laughs gently. “Is this really that distracting to you?”

Dream looks up from their hands. “Hm?”

He watches George’s laugh increase in volume, and he gives his palm a squeeze. Warm fingertips pinned to his knuckles press back.

“How the hell did you drive?” George asks, and Dream’s gaze softens under the relentless teasing. It feels *intentional*, having George’s eyes on him, his fingers in hand, the gift of being his object of affection.

“One-handed,” Dream says faintly.

George’s gaze narrows. “Why *are* you so good at driving one handed? You don’t... text and drive, right? You promised me you wouldn’t do that.”

Traces of guilt undercut Dream’s euphoria. “Well,” he says, “I mean—”

George drops his hand. “*Clay.*”

“It’s only every once in a while,” he pitches poorly at the loss. “For emergencies, or like, changing the music—”

“Americans drive like maniacs, you realize that? All it takes is a second of not looking at the road for you to change someone’s life for good.”

Dream is unfortunately familiar with George’s speech. “I know, I know—”

“No, seriously, you can’t be reckless like that, I—” The look on George’s face changes. “What if something happens to you?”

Dream’s lips part silently. George’s attention refocuses to the napkins and utensils before them. Normally, George says, “*What if you hurt someone?*” and Dream teases him for being stressed, and the conversation dissolves with jokes about driving on wrong sides of the road. Yet this is an unfriendly reminder—if something *did* happen, Dream would be stranded here, while George is an ocean away.

“You’re worried about me?” he clarifies gently, frowning in the silence that follows. “Why did you... hold on to me in the car, then? If I knew it made you feel unsafe, I wouldn’t have—”

“I didn’t feel unsafe,” George interrupts, glancing from his face to sorting the sugar packets. “I should have. I mean, it’s *dangerous* to drive like that and I clearly wasn’t helping, but when you had me there, it was like...” His breath slips into his words softly. “None of that mattered anymore.”

Dream’s eyes rake over the open expression on George’s face, pinched in his brows and falling from his lips. Speechlessness envelops him.

*I made him feel that way?*

Dream quietly draws George’s hand back. His fingers slide loosely over the smooth backside of George’s palm, and he pulls their touch off the table to rest on the seat below.

He doesn’t push George to look at him. When he hears a light exhale, he carefully glances to see a softened smile curved where a previous frown had been.

They don't speak much before their food arrives, but it is appreciated after long hours of tiptoeing chatter and nervously queuing in between heavy pauses. Now, they have the grace of their touching hands between them. Dream has never loved silence more.

Until George's meal is set down before him, and they break into a fit of outraged laughter again. It's a pancake stack of sorts, adorned with a whipped cream smile, dotted by chocolate chips and cherries.

"It looks like—" Dream's voice bursts through his wheeze terribly. "It's made for—for *children*."

George's laughter collapses him into Dream's side. With his forehead pinned to Dream's shoulder, both unable to form complete sentences or breathe even, they give into their lack of sleep entirely.

George stabs into the face brutally. Dream makes a murdered food comment that reminds them of an inside joke from years ago, and they're both lost in a bout of hiccups for several more minutes.

Once they've properly calmed down, he asks, "Is it any good?"

George nods and nudges the plate towards him. "Try."

He shovels off part of the pancake with the edge of his fork and takes a bite. "Wow," he muffles. "That is sweet."

"Very." George pulls back the plate. "How are your eggs?"

"They taste like eggs," Dream replies into a mouthful.

"Can I?"

Dream covers his lips with a palm and nods. As he watches George pluck a clump from his plate, he says, "You know." George gives him a look. He continues through a smile, "This is awfully domestic."

"I knew you were going to say that," George mumbles defeatedly.

"So you agree?"

George's jaw moves painstakingly slow to prolong his tasting of the food. By the time he swallows, Dream's smile hasn't budged.

"Agree," George says, "with what?"

"That this is domestic," Dream ventures as he watches George's fork sink back into his food. "Kind of like a... a—"

George drops his utensils to clatter on his plate and stares at him.

Dream raises his hands defensively. "Okay, okay." He laughs. "Sheesh."

He busies himself with the cooled hot cocoa and redesigning of sausage links on his plate. He'd ordered a hefty meal with the intention of saving some for Sapnap, but George makes him nervous, and eating makes him less so.

"Besides," George mutters suddenly, "we've already been on one."

Dream's eyes leap up from his food. "What? No we haven't."

The placid guise of seriousness on George's face concerns Dream immediately. While George remains focused on the plate before him, his mind bulldozes through every interaction they've shared. *I wouldn't forget something like that*, he questions. *Right?*

His internal plight is halted when he sees a slight uptick of the corner of George's mouth.

"Wait," Dream says. "...When?"

George answers him without hesitation. "In Minecraft over four years ago."

A bubble of laughter tears through Dream's chest. "Sh—shut up, oh my god," he stammers. "That did *not* count."

"Yes it did!" George defends with a smile. "There was food, and candle lighting—"

"*Torch* lighting," Dream corrects.

"Exactly." George points to him enthusiastically from the other end of his fork. "Very rustic, thank you."

He wipes his palms on the napkin in his lap to ease the sudden worry that'd perspired there. He's sure George knows he gave him a heart attack with the way he's fighting a grin.

Dream slides an arm on the booth behind George's shoulders. "Is rustic what you prefer over pancakes and orange juice?"

"Nuh-uh." George avoids his glance as he takes another bite. "M'not telling you what I prefer."

Napkins and plates are nudged aside when Dream reaches to gently withdraw the fork from George's fingers. The metal slides away with ease, Dream sets it down quietly, and George finally turns towards him.

"Are you scared of me knowing too much?" he asks in a murmur.

George swallows as he looks up at him. Dream follows the movement in his throat before meeting his eyes.

"Very," George says.

The rhythm of Dream's heart courses loud between his ears. They're sitting awfully close for a morning meal between friends, and George is letting him lean closer.

His downcast eyes drag openly over the details on George's face; freckles scattered by his nose, a growing scruff cast across his jaw, and the slight press between his lips that never seems to disappear.

Dream spent a sleepless night listening to words fall from George's mouth. If he were any closer, he'd feel the warm breath slipping from it.

Dream's gaze drifts back up past freshly rosied cheeks to meet his eyes.

George tips his head in warning. "Don't," he says softly.

"I know." Dream leans back. "I wasn't going to." He doesn't need to say that he wanted to; everything in him from the moment he met George has been howling it anyway.

As they drift away from each other and back to their food, Dream refrains from telling George his flush matches the assorted fruit on the side of his plate. George links their ankles together clumsily beneath the table.

“In an IHOP, of all places,” George mumbles. He stabs into his pancakes again as Dream laughs. “A bloody IHOP.”

The shell of his home is quiet when they creep back inside. Every shuffle of shoes and closing of doors echoes off the high ceilings, preserved in spilling daylight, to settle on their tired shoulders.

Dream’s eyes grew heavy throughout the duration of their ride home. He’s surprised George made it the whole way without stealing a quick nap or two. Their satisfaction from a good meal dropped steeply into their lurking drowsiness, and true to his mumbled wishes during the drive, George heads for the living room couch immediately.

Dream parts from him.

He tiptoes up the stairs and down the hall to retrieve Patches from her sleepy kingdom. She slips by his ankles routinely.

“Mornin’ to you too,” he mutters as she runs away. He glances over where Sapnap is passed out on his pillows then quietly shuts the door behind him.

He decides to leave him a quick text, *Whenever ur up we have leftovers for u.*

The kitchen counter is cold when he sets the boxes of food on it. Plastic crinkles in his hands, he idly checks the contents inside, and a light trickle of unease creeps down his spine at the sudden lack of George’s presence after their night.

He stalls once he reaches the receipt in the bag. They’d glanced over it, thumbed out cash, and the copy was tossed into the bag without a second thought—but the light from the sink window illuminates writing sprawled on the backside.

Dream flips it.

The waitresses who’d served them left a note in blue ink.

It reads: *To D & G,*

*My sister and I didn’t want to bother you during your meal, but we both enjoy your content a lot. We grew up playing MC together and appreciate all that you do. We know how important your privacy is, so we promise to not share any of this with others. Hope George has a good stay in Florida, and you two have a wonderful day!*

*- Sarah and Shay.*

Dream stares at the neat scrawl.

They were *recognized*. Between lingering looks and side-door chatter, two fans now know his face, which is far more than before. His pulse quickly beats an ache into his head.

At least he paid in cash; he can’t imagine if his full name and credit card information fell into the wrong hands. At least they were nice, not asking for pictures, letting them breathe.

“Jesus,” Dream mutters. Exhaustion creeps into his bones.

The note and sudden vulnerability doesn’t bother him like he’d expected, but a piece of it does. He rereads “*hope George has a good stay in Florida*” more times than he should. The polite waitresses have given him a poorly timed reminder that this is a *temporary* visit before George flies home again.

*Easy, he tells himself as he quietly stores the receipt in a drawer. He’s not leaving yet.*

Dream leaves the kitchen behind to soothe his worry, and he finds Patches again in the living room.

She’s curled up on the long sectional of his couch next to George, who’s muttering to her sleepily, and passing a hand over her spine. She’s grown comfortable with him quicker than any other stranger Dream has brought into her home.

*I wish I could warn you he’s not going to stay, he thinks, though it doesn’t temper the ache in his chest.*

Dream glances to the sun soaked windows.

It’s finally the tomorrow they’ve been dreading. George is no longer in the diner, but back here, where they can’t pretend to hide behind night and its trappings anymore.

*What now? his mind tosses up rapidly. What are we supposed to do now?*

George looks content with Patches in his bubble of delirium. Dream’s dread curves over it from the outside. He can’t pop it—not so soon, not yet.

He carefully lowers himself to sit on the edge and nudges George’s ankles. “Are you stealing my cat?”

George blinks up at him. “She’s s’cute.”

Dream smiles. “Jeez. Someone’s tired.”

A defensive scowl attempts to cross George’s face, but quickly melts into a yawn. Dream reaches over George’s legs to scratch Patches’ back.

“How’re you still alive?” George mutters as his eyes glide shut.

“Honestly,” Dream says, “I feel like I’m about to drop at any second.”

He begins to pull his hand away, and George’s fingers connect with his wrist to stop him. The touch glides over his warm skin, then up the blond hairs on his forearm, and pauses to grasp the crook of his elbow.

George tugs him forward.

“Hey, *hey*—” Dream falls to his side between couch cushions and the curve of George’s back. His face heats up, as George’s grip loosens on his arm, but keeps it draped over his side. “Y—you okay?”

He feels George sink back deeper into his chest. “M’okay.”

A warm exhale leaks out of Dream’s chest and into George’s hair. This is nothing like their

closeness in the hall; socks shifting against his calves, the warmth of George's body cozied between him and the couch, how George eases into his touch when his arm closes around them.

Dream pulls him in with his eyes wide open. "This... is okay?" he repeats.

Patches is purring somewhere softly in the distance. Their hands slow in a yearning complication before her.

"For now," George whispers.

Dream listens to his breathing as it pushes rhythmically against his chest. George's sleepiness lures him in as his abundance of nerves beg him to stay awake. He doesn't let his hands curl tighter than they have to; he doesn't let his arm fall to wrap around George's waist.

"When we're not tired, and stupid... this is all going to go away," Dream says slowly. "Isn't it?"

His question lays unanswered. Slow seconds fall into minutes, and he realizes George has finally slipped from their conscious venturing. The realization both frightens and calms him, because it means they're one step closer to change, and more pain, and more distance.

He doesn't care if it hurts to hold him. It's better than nothing at all.

"I'm happy with just this," Dream confesses into George's hair. It's as honest as he's ever been and his throat tightens because of it. "You could leave tomorrow, and I'd be happy with this."

He lets his eyes fall shut. They will be different once they wake, he knows, he'll go to his session and return to George as nothing more than a phantom dream. Though he wants to help the warmth of this moment last, he's ushered into the depths of himself anyway.

Dream's fingers grow loose in their hands; the rise and fall of his broad chest deepens. When he's on the brink of sleep, he feels George's palm slide away.

A moment later, warm fingertips reach back and press into Dream's cheekbone. He's dreamt of the softness of such a touch before, received on the lagoon beach after a version of George removed his mask. If the silent grace is real, it means his dream came true.

It also means that George heard him.

Dream keeps his eyes pressed shut and doesn't reveal he felt it, yet his heart is on fire. It heats in his chest and tumbles ash through his veins as only one thought resounds in his mind.

*I have so much to tell Dr. Lauren.*

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter was difficult to say the least. I think this fic is what you get when you cross an unmotivated perfectionist with a tired love for writing. but! I'm happy with how it turned out, progress is progress is progress :) I very much enjoy writing long dialogue-based scenes, I missed their phone calls and insistence to be Friends who act like not a Couple lol. the lack of sapnap hurt though, sleepy king deserves his own story. and patches too. big thanks again to the fic's beta zach for being such a great help!!

happy june, hope everyone is having a good summer/winter wherever you are. I appreciate all the support and comments and concerns. I have a feeling my schedule is going to grow a lot more loose, but I'll try to stick to it. love you all <3

edit: going on vacation so next update probably won't be for a while !

# Regret

## Chapter Summary

Sapnap's time in Florida dwindle. They're determined to make it count.

## Chapter Notes

CW for this chapter // mentions of alcohol, underage drinking. Don't forget to check updated tags :)

Please don't be weird to any CC's about this fic, if you're going to crosspost my work I'd ask you at least use proper formatting (italics and bold text my beloved), and try not to spoil it for others I guess! I know it's been a while, thank you for your patience and all the kind words <3 ily guys

Bit of a change of texting format, too:

**Bold is Sapnap**, regular text is Dream, and *italics are George*.

Hope this helps. Long chapter. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*(11:52 AM) Bro*

*(11:53 AM) [Attachment: Image]*

*(11:53 AM) [Attachment: Image]*

*(11:53 AM) [Attachment: Image]*

*(11:54 AM) Waht the hell did I miss last night*

*(3:19 PM) sorry man, just finished my appointment and am getting food rn. back in ten*

*(3:20 PM) also delete those*

*(3:20 PM) idiot*

*(3:23 PM) Beef*

*(3:24 PM) ???*

*(3:24 PM) Beef burrito*

Dream rolls his eyes. Between the restless bouncing of his knee against the steering wheel and afternoon sun glinting off of storefront windows, Sapnap also seems to be avoiding whatever it was he did or didn't see when coming downstairs in the morning. The spammed photos of George

sleeping with his face buried in Dream's chest ensure he's earned a rant of mixed emotions once he returns home.

Dream sighs. Bringing a warm barrier of food as a peace offering may not be the worst idea they've shared. His thumb hovers, considering writing out an apology, and more messages buzz in his palm:

**(3:26 PM) Horchata too and I'll love you forevsr**

**(3:26 PM) Dorever**

**(3:27 PM) Fuck**

**(3:28 PM) Forever\***

**(3:29 PM) k.**

The nerves in Dream's chest are dormant when hauling the steaming meals home, jostling bags in his grip threatening to spill, but he hesitates with a heel on his concrete doorstep. White arches loom over his head. The doorbell sits unrung beneath his suspended fingers.

He could press the button and make Sapnap open the entrance for him—they'd done the same when he returned from his appointment last week—yet his hand stalls. If he chooses to let the sound ring throughout the halls of his home, it could wake George if he's still sleeping on the couch.

*It hasn't been that long since I left,* Dream considers. His eyes trace over the weathered sheen on the door. *I may not have to see him again so soon.*

When his reminder to arrive at Dr. Lauren's office on time interrupted him from their nap on the couch, it'd been surprisingly easy to leave George behind. An untangling of limbs, passing feelings of wanting to stay, then a breathable calm guiding Dream out the door.

He's okay with the remnants of their night—the six hour call, their IHOP breakfast, George's spine bumping his chest in the hallway, George's ankles linked with his on the couch—but spent parts of his session worrying George won't feel the same.

*"You confuse worry with hope,"* Dr. Lauren had said. *"Replace the word. See how it feels."*

*I hope he's still sleeping,* Dream thinks. *I hope we're okay.*

*I hope nothing big changes, I hope I don't mess it up.*

The handle turns with ease when he steps into the foyer. Weighing down in plastic straps against his palm, Sapnap's burrito sways as he shuts the door behind him.

*We'll be fine for the week if we don't mess it up.*

A quiet meow sounds from the carpet below his feet. His eyes drop to see Patches curiously approaching the food in his hands, and her whiskers poke through the fabric on his ankles as he crouches down.

"Hey, you," Dream says warmly. He frees a hand to pet her. "No, no, that's not for you, silly. That's people food."

She pokes her head into a bag. He scoops her one-handed to his chest preventatively and smiles when she complains.

He kisses her head. “You act like I don’t feed you.”

Her claws sink into the fabric of his shirt. Carefully coaxing her to balance up on his shoulder, Dream picks up a resting bag and attempts to juggle it all despite the ache in his arms. He doesn’t take two steps before an amused voice interrupts him.

“Do you need help with that?”

Dream looks up from the carpet. His heart begins to pound at the sight of George hovering opposite the foyer, hands curling tighter around the bag handles.

He’s awake. Hands in his pockets, smiling a shade softer than his crewneck; alive and blinking slowly.

“Hey,” Dream says. “Yeah, sure. Uh, if you want to take her, that’d be great.” His voice feels rushed and airy in his throat. “I thought you’d still be asleep.”

George doesn’t seem to notice. He regards him from the end of the room. “I woke up a couple minutes after you left.”

“Oh.” Dream doesn’t move when George steps closer. “Did… did you sleep okay?”

*Do you feel okay?*

He looks at the ceiling, the walls, any empty space his eyes can grab when George draws close enough to reach for Patches on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” George answers. “Very okay.”

His eyes jump to George’s face. He remembers the feel of spooning his back, their fingers tangled together, and the relaxed expression he dawned when he had no conscious reason to guard it. The visible ease is only half-missing now; Dream studies him openly.

“Very?” he repeats.

George’s cheeks tint slightly. His knuckles graze Dream’s shoulder. “What are these bags for?”

A surprised smile lifts across Dream’s features. George offers a look to make him focus.

*Very okay*, his head repeats, *very, very, very*.

“Our dinner, I guess. There’s this taqueria by my therapist’s office and I stop there whenever I’m done,” he explains.

Patches is lifted away from him. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

George steps back with his cat in a careful hold as stray hairs cling to his dark hoodie. Patches’ tail flicks against his forearm. Dream wants to comment on their conjoined cuteness but holds his tongue.

“How did it go?”

“My—” Dream clears his throat dryly. “My session?”

George nods. Confused warmth spreads through Dream’s rib cage, relieved he’s bothering to ask, to help; to talk. He doesn’t know why George being attentive and at ease surprises him so much.

“It was a lot,” Dream confesses. Restlessly, he begins to move towards the hall. “I’m pretty beat.”

“Well, hey, is there um—” George steps back and lightly presses his fingertips against Dream’s chest to stop him. “Is there anything we should talk about?”

Dream’s eyes fall to where the touch connects to his sternum, sprawled lightly, lingering still. Knuckles skim down his shirt before falling away completely.

When he glances back up, the look on George’s face floods him. He’d spoken with the same quiet patience Dream has heard on the phone for years, but the upwards tilt of his brows and relaxed set on his jaw makes his face seem softer than his voice has ever been.

Vulnerable; open. This is the George he thinks he’d do anything for, the one he misses the moment he’s gone.

“Or anything that you want to talk about with me,” George continues, looking away. “I just figured since yesterday was—*yesterday*, and I’m me, you’d maybe be lost or—or wondering about a couple things, I’m sure I said some stuff when I was tired but honestly I had a really good time—”

“George,” Dream interrupts gently. “You... had fun?”

His lips press together into a private smile. “Yeah. I did.”

“Me too,” he says. “That’s all that matters, then. Right?”

George’s brows draw together as he shifts Patches against his shoulder. “You’re... weirdly calm. Calmer than I thought you’d be. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“...Yeah?” Dream tips his head slightly. “Should I—should I not be? Is that what you want to talk about?”

George parts his lips to say more, but he closes his mouth before offering an answer.

Dream’s voice lowers. “What is it?”

Their eyes meet in the center of the hall. A matter of hours before when light slowly leaked into Dream’s house, they could have shared a similar silence on call with George a bedroom away. Yet an exhale leaves George’s nose, and he moves suddenly, reminding them they’re enclosed in the same space.

Dream’s eyes follow every motion of George stepping closer, his hand sinking into his pocket, and fingers withdrawing a familiar white paper.

George extends it towards him. Numerical ink on one side, writing in pen on the other.

*The receipt.*

“Oh.” Dream lowers a bag to the floor and takes it from his fingers gingerly. “Where’d you...”

“It was in a drawer,” George answers. “Sapnap spilled something and I was looking for napkins and found it, but you... you’ve seen it?”

He scans over the kind note from their waitresses again. “I’ve seen it.”

George slowly retracts his hand to pet down Patches’ back. They both regard the paper between them in growing silence, standing inches away, considering the weight of such harmless written words. It’s their only physical reminder that the night and morning before ever happened; that it wasn’t a shared lucid dream.

“I was going to show it to you sooner,” Dream mutters. “But you were so tired, then *I* was so tired... I just forgot.” His eyes drift up from the paper to find George already watching him. “I hope you’re not upset.”

“Upset?” George echoes softly.

“Yeah, ‘cause they recognized us and we were, I don’t know, being *us* in public, I thought you’d \_\_”

“I don’t care about that,” George says, “at all.”

Dream stares at him. “Why... not?”

“I—I had a feeling they knew who we were, when we were there,” George admits. “It’s happened to me before, only when I’m alone, and I didn’t want to scare you. You seemed so happy. I don’t know.”

The fuzzy warmth of early light in the diner, sweet taste of pancakes, and dizzied closeness they shared seeps back into Dream’s chest.

“You knew?” Dream voices quietly. “You knew and you still...” *Held my hand, shared my food, let me laugh, let me pretend I could kiss you.*

“I hope you’re not upset,” George mumbles.

“What?” Patches perks up at the incredulous lift in his voice. “Not at all, George. I think that’s very sweet of you to do for me.”

George huffs. “Calm down.”

He smiles. “No, I mean it. You wanted to protect me. My little guardian angel.”

George plucks the receipt from Dream’s hands. “Good to know you’re feeling okay enough to make jokes about it, Clay.”

“Hey,” Dream says warmly. “I can be funny, sometimes.”

“I’m being serious.” George pauses his folding of the paper to tip it up lightly and stare at him. “You’re weird about your face. These people saw it. You’re really okay?”

Dream takes a deep breath, and enunciates, “I’m really okay.”

“Good.” George carefully balances the purring cat against his chest as he stores the receipt away again. “That’s good.”

*How could I not be okay*, he thinks, *when I have this, here, with you?*

Dream draws in an uncertain inhale. “Of... of course I’m okay,” he attempts to voice the thought. “I’m just glad I can spend time with you.”

George's smile makes his breath grow thin. "Just me?" he teases airily.

"Yes, George," Dream says. "Just you."

He raises his hand to pet Patches, and as his fingers slip through soft fur, the backs of his knuckles gently graze George's jaw. Accidental, but meaningful, he lets the contact ring.

George's eyes dance over his features. The stretching walls seem closer; the dimmed overhead lights grow faint.

"I..." George exhales. His head tips lightly. "I didn't like not seeing you when I woke up."

Dream swallows. "I didn't like leaving you there."

His wrist turns slowly, thumb dragging up the side of George's face and resting below his cheekbone. Dream isn't sure why they're letting it happen, but he swipes over the soft blush settled there anyway. They stand in a distracted daze that reminds him of their day in the rain—a touch exploring quietly, comfort cozying the silence.

"Wh—what..." George's words die, but he hears them.

*What are you doing?*

"I—" Dream's brows pinch together as his voice wanders. "Don't... know."

After a moment of hesitation longer, George clears his throat. Dream's hand quickly drops away and they both watch it go with traces of regret.

He blinks. "Sorry—"

"It's fine," George rushes.

"Oh—kay, okay." Dream briefly ameliorates where his mouth had run dry, and suffers a violent uptick in his chest when he sees George's eyes fall to the motion. "Okay. Good—good talk? You know what, um—" He grabs the discarded bag at their feet to continue down the hall, and George and Patches resume following by his side. "I feel like my arms are going to fall off, so let me just set this stuff down—"

"Well, wait," George rushes as the kitchen breaches their view, "we may not want to go in—"

Dream halts.

"—there," he finishes.

Sapnap stares at them from the marble island. His grin is wide.

"Right." Dream lets his head catch up to his face, exhaustion sinking across it, while they meet each other's eye. "You."

"Hi, honey," Sapnap says. "Welcome home."

He moves hastily to leave the hallway behind and sets the bags on the counter before them with a thud. "I have your beef."

Sapnap tugs the food closer to rifle through the containers. "I think *we* have beef."

As much as Dream wishes he responded to Sapnap properly over text so they wouldn't have to do this now, he isn't sure what he would've said. Perhaps he could have typed a paragraph, something that started with "*I'm sorry for not telling you*" and ended near "*but I think I'm really happy.*"

He knows Sapnap will understand. The current glint in his narrowed eyes seems like he already *does* understand.

Dream turns to George. "Did you tell him what—"

"We talked," Sapnap interrupts.

George gives him an apologetic look as he sets Patches down. "He cornered me."

"You could've just responded to your texts like a normal person instead of telling me *literally* nothing," Sapnap says.

Mindful to not catch Patches' scurrying paws, Dream tugs out a chair and lowers onto it. "I was *literally* in therapy. Talking to my therapist. No I couldn't."

"Sounds like a lame excuse to me." Sapnap's burrito unwraps in the warm, tinfoil casing as he pauses. "How is your mom, though?"

"She's good," Dream answers while George asks, "What?"

Dream pulls out the low-backed chair next to him for George to sit. "It's another post-session thing. Mexican food, call my mom, come home and write about it."

"That's... nice," George says.

Dream catches the soft note in his voice. He keeps his eyes cast down on the bags as he retrieves his meal, knowing if he glanced at George, he would get lost in it.

"But yes, she's good," he continues. "Gonna break the news to my sister about the guy she's been dating, because, y'know." He gives Sapnap a look. "She's not a coward."

Sapnap takes a far too big bite of his burrito and muffles, "Not only did I wake up to you two cuddling on the couch *without* me, I had to find out from Twitter trends that you were up at like, 4 a.m. last night." He wipes sauce from his chin and returns the glare. "I'm not the coward here."

Dream sinks a plastic fork into his plate of food. "We're even."

"No," Sapnap says, "we're *not* even."

George pulls tortilla chips from a bag and munches on them mournfully. "I was going to warn you about this."

He smiles at the light mumble muting George's accent, and is sure the fondness slips into his words. "Has it been like this since you got up?"

"Unfortunately."

"Sorry I couldn't be here to save you," he finds himself saying.

To his surprise, George meets his eyes with ease. "You're here now."

Dream feels warmth rise to his cheeks. The urge to reach out and carefully draw George's hand

into his own like he had in the diner booth floods him. He's not worried anymore about George pulling away, and that hope feels irresistible, too.

Sapnap clears his throat.

He refocuses to see Sapnap holding his phone, shoulders straightened and mouth smiling crooked in a way that means he's going to say something Dream doesn't like.

"You owe me some apology beer," he says, and Dream immediately rolls his eyes.

"No, I don't."

Sapnap scowls. "Yes, you do."

"For *what*," Dream spits.

He raises a hand to count off on his fingers as George gives Dream a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "For excluding me from your silly little night, for bringing back *half* a pancake and *half* a sausage and having the audacity to tell me there's leftovers—"

"Did you still eat them?" Dream interrupts.

Sapnap pauses. "Well, yes. But—"

"Doesn't count." He gestures to the messy counter between them. "Plus, I *just* got you more food."

Sapnap waves at him with three fingers held high. "No, no, no. You ignored my texts, made me hear about the whole fiasco from *George*, of all people—"

"You *asked*," George says in exasperation.

Sapnap ignores him as he continues, "And I didn't even see you until..." He glances at his phone. "4 p.m. on my second to last day here."

Dream sighs. A twinge of guilt prods in his chest at the reminder of Sapnap's departure in two days' time. He stares across the island as Sapnap waits for a response, watching him slowly take another bite of his food during the anticipated pause.

"While that is all very sad," Dream begins, "and I am very sorry—"

"*We* are very sorry," George corrects.

"Yes. While we are very sorry," he continues, "I know you're not actually upset and are just trying to make me go to the liquor store. So no—"

Sapnap groans. "Come *on*."

"I will not buy you beer," Dream says with finality.

Napkins wiped with grease and sour cream are tossed to bounce off his chest. Dream stuffs the trash in an empty bag and fails to ignore when George's knee bumps him under the island. The contact steals his attention easily.

He'd told Dr. Lauren how he's always waiting for a fall with George, a drawback of some kind that looms over any warm moments they share. It's as though a piece of him is always concerned with the future, where they may be, where his actions will take them. In return, he'd been given a

simple question to remind himself with: “*Am I in the present?*”

Dream’s eyes pass over the amused disdain on Sapnap’s face as he shakes his head, and how George’s sigh leaves his lips with familiarity.

*I’m present now*, he considers.

“Sorry, Dream,” George mutters, “but it’s not that simple.”

Dream frowns. “What isn’t?”

“I hate to do this to you.” Sapnap scrolls through his waiting phone with far too much confidence. “I thought you would agree to buy out of the kindness of your heart, but...”

He lowers his voice towards George. “What is he talking about?”

“Here.” Sapnap’s smile grows into a grin. “January twentieth, twenty-eighteen. Four o’clock central time.”

Dream’s face falls. “Oh, god. What do you have?”

“Screenshots,” George says.

“Screenshots,” Sapnap agrees, “of us talking about this very meetup. How fun is that?”

He hands his phone forward. Dream takes it fearfully, once again entirely helpless under the over-accuracy of his friends’ memories. Who knows what he sent Sapnap when he was eighteen.

His eyes fall to the Discord messages captured on the screen next to old profile pictures.

**(4:00 PM) At this rate it’s not gonna happen until we’re ALL 21**

**(4:01 PM) ??? that’s bs and you know it**

**(4:02 PM) It’s the truth dude it’ll be years before I see you again**

**(4:03 PM) can you stop being so dramatic**

**(4:03 PM) I’m just telling it like is**

**(4:04 PM) You’re being pessimistic.**

**(4:04 PM) that’s called being pessimistic**

**(4:05 PM) omg George**

**(4:05 PM) look at us <3**

**(4:06 PM) Lol.**

**(4:07 PM) send a heart back? wtf**

**(4:08 PM) No thanks**

**(4:09 PM) Can you shut up**

**(4:09 PM) I swear to god**

**(4:10 PM) When we finally do meet you two are gnna end up cuddling without me or something**

Dream scoffs at his and Sapnap's messages while rereading, but realization slowly begins to sink into his chest. Under a string of various "screw you's" and "fuck off's," he finds what the conversation was saved for.

**(4:12 PM) yeah right**

**(4:13 PM) if that ends up happening I'll drink a 12 pack with you myself**

He hangs his head.

"Read it and weep, bitch," Sapnap says.

Dream remembers the conversation vaguely, how his offhand remark turned into Sapnap clinging to the bet and swearing to hold him to it. He can't help but wonder if George was offended by his adamance against it, or if that's why he was pulled down on the couch early in the morning, to fulfill a wordless wound he never knew was there.

His eyes lift to catch Sapnap's satisfied grin.

"You are the worst," Dream says.

"You did it to yourself," George reminds him.

"Who's side are you on?" Dream complains. "I don't want to go to the store just for that. Talk about a waste of gas, *and* money."

"You have," Sapnap says, "so much money."

"I didn't drink then, and I don't drink now," Dream dismisses, leaning back in his seat. "That's not happening."

"One beer, that's all I ask. I'll take care of the rest." Sapnap points at him from the other end of the messy burrito. "You *have* to. I said I'd hold you to it."

Dream's lack of response forces them into silence. He fiddles with the mess of rice and beans under his fork and contemplates why he ever invited the chaotic force of his best friends into his home in the first place. He wants to say they're too old for bets, promises, and "gotcha's" like these, but knows they'll never grow out of it.

His knee presses against George's thigh under the marble island again. It's an intentional touch, out of sight and inside a secret, and he feels George relax into its presence. One beer as a price for their newfound closeness is not necessarily a bad deal by any means.

"Okay," Dream says finally. Sapnap is quick to celebrate with a dramatic fist-pump that makes George laugh. "Okay, but not tonight. I have this to finish, and *journals* to do, and I've been exhausted from—" He glances at George. "Since yesterday."

"From since yesterday," George repeats amusedly.

"I'm still *very* tired," Dream defends. "I need to recharge. You guys are welcome to go back to whatever you were doing before I got here, which sounds like..." He strains to place the white noise floating in from the living room. "Mario Kart?" They both nod. "Where did you even find

the Wii—ugh. Nevermind.”

He closes his food to retreat to his room. Sapnap is giving him a more obnoxious smile, one ridden with support, and Dream wishes he knew how to express that in any *other* way than bringing up years-old screenshots.

“I’ll be back out later,” he concludes while rising from his chair. “Think of more stuff for us to do tomorrow though, Sap. I don’t want that to be our only plan.”

“Sounds good,” he says.

Dream hesitates before lightly resting a hand on George’s upper back. His t-shirt is warm and his face dawns a similar shade of surprise when he turns to look up at Dream.

“Text me if you need anything,” he says lamely. “‘Kay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” George says. “Of course.”

“Great.” Dream pulls his hand away. His fingers feel cold the moment he leaves the kitchen counter behind.

As he nears the base of the stairs, he hears Sapnap’s voice float down the hall, “Ready for Bowser Jr. to kick your ass?”

—

His phone doesn’t receive any texts from George until the following afternoon. After a night of loose schedules and mindless relaxation, Sapnap poorly plans their last full day together—a half-made breakfast and a somehow successful stream—and sends Dream to the store at four in the evening.

“Just let me come with you,” Sapnap proposes, his words landing on Dream’s back as they trail to his car.

“No,” Dream repeats. “Go keep George company.”

He sighs. “If I *have* to. Can you—slow down—can you take this, at least?”

A lightly lined paper folded between Sapnap’s knuckles is extended Dream’s way. Writing descends in a neat list marked by bullets and eraser marks of obvious contemplation. The hastily scribbled items are brands he’s vaguely familiar with.

Dream eyes the paper and glances back up. “There’s no way we’re finishing all of this.”

“I’m hopeful,” Sapnap says.

He frowns at the various drinks that will undoubtedly sit in his fridge until his mom visits again. “Hopeful for what?”

“Deep down inside my bones, I know,” Sapnap says. “I just *know* George is secretly a tank.”

Dream huffs. “Yeah, okay.”

“He’ll be able to drink this no problem,” Sapnap insists. “You’re in love with a man of many secrets.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Dream stores the list in his wallet habitually. “You think he’ll be able to outdrink me?”

The midday sun beating on his neck burns less than the abruptness of Sapnap’s laugh. He reaches to open the driver’s side door for Dream in faux politeness.

“One sip is all you’ll need, big man.”

Dream lowers inside the car and squints up at him. “Is it really smart to shit on the guy who’s buying for you in the first place?”

Sapnap shuts the door with an overeager smile. “I love you,” he muffles through the glass. “Have fun. Don’t get lost.”

Mostly to himself and lost to the hum of the car’s engine, Dream grumbles, “Whatever.”

While warmed by the sunny drive under a cloudless sky, part of him is glad he’s allowing George and Sapnap time alone before they’re separated. It could be the last time they’ll see each other for a while, and though unspoken, they all seem to be aware of it. He’s determined to make their final day a memorable one.

Dream’s phone buzzes idly in a cup holder when stalled at a longer light. His fingers twitch, George’s warning to not text and drive rings in his ears, and he leaves the message for when he’s pulled up to the liquor store.

Once safely parked, he opens it.

*(3:12 PM) You said to text if I needed help*

*(3:13 PM) He’s making me dig through your board game collection. When will you be back again??*

A smile lifts across Dream’s face, small and sanguine. They’ve been surprisingly calm after the day before; glances and comments delivered lightly, teasing kept to a minimum, sharing an unspoken warmth in the reticence. It’s as though they both decided to focus on Sapnap for the day as it could be his “last,” despite his flight being late in the afternoon tomorrow.

*(3:21 PM) prolly in another ten to fifteen*

He tips the weight of his phone in his hands, then types again.

*(3:22 PM) missing me that bad already?*

He exits the car. The humid air embraces him with every haste step towards the shop’s door, he tries to ignore the nervous buzz in his gut, and a reply is sent through.

*(3:24 PM) Why didn’t you take me with you?*

Dream’s eyebrows raise with the sudden stutter in his chest. Harmless flirting tossed between familiar messages shouldn’t have a hold on him in the distracting, exhilarating way it does now. He wonders if George’s heart is used to a half-jump every time his responses go through, or if he stalls and stares at warmer words with the same flicker of hope firing from the screen.

*(3:25 PM) I wanted to be able to keep my eyes on the road*

*(3:26 PM) can’t do that when you’re around*

The store entrance chimes when he dips into the air conditioned hall. Overhead lights glint off of wine labels, and his reflection curves in passing over dark glass crowding the shelves. He knows he should be hunting for the first item on the list, but his eyes drop to his phone.

*(3:28 PM) Sorry I'm so distracting, then*

A short laugh escapes Dream's chest.

*(3:29 PM) something tells me you're not sorry at all*

*(3:29 PM) :)*

*(3:30 PM) How goes the booze run?*

His gaze scrapes over the tops of shelves indifferently.

*(3:31 PM) unsuccessful so far*

*(3:32 PM) Why's that?*

He grins. The numbered read receipt falls fluidly under his next message:

*(3:33 PM) my hands are busy with you*

George's typing bubble rapidly manifests in a series of short appearances, but nothing comes through. The silence forces an unabashed wheeze through his teeth.

*(3:37 PM) I am going to leave you alone now so you can shop.*

Dream can nearly hear the pointed dryness in his words, until another message appears.

*(3:38 PM) This is me showing compassion for your hands.*

A satisfied hum dips low in Dream's chest. Surrounded by bottles of liquid courage, swarmed by the scent of stale cardboard, he could get drunk only on the pursuit of this.

He sighs.

*(3:40 PM) you're so kind, George*

*(3:41 PM) bless ur soul*

As expected, he's left on read.

By the time he's finished mulling through the aisles and bringing bottles back to the house, Sapnap and George have assembled a spread of snacks and games on his dining room table. In a quiet moment with his best friends sitting before the old board games that haven't seen daylight in years, Dream carefully collects the memory. George casually scrolling on his phone, Sapnap thumbing through dusty cards, both at ease with each other in his home as a promise that someday, this will be daily; this will be reality.

He moves into the room, and Sapnap perks up. "Where's the beer?"

Dream eyes the cards in Sapnap's hands cautiously. "Fair warning, I can't remember the last time that deck got used."

“Oh, god,” George mutters, lifting his hands off the spade-covered surface. “Is that what that smell is?”

The back of the chair is cool beneath Dream’s palm when he pulls it out from beneath the table. Crisp air conditioning and overhead glow make light of the space around them. White cards spread on dark wood, Dream thinks the clubs and diamonds look like the freckles that dot George’s forearms.

Dream ruffles his hair. “Don’t be dramatic.”

His fingers quickly lift away when George tips his head back. He peers up at him, eyes narrowed, but his mouth is curled in a sharp grin. “I’m never dramatic.”

Dream glances away with a fond smile.

Sapnap meets his eye and gestures to his empty hands. “Where?” he drawls.

“It’s all in the kitchen. Calm down.” Dream lowers down into his chair as Sapnap begins his hunt towards the counter. “I don’t like how eager he is.” George huffs, and Dream calls into the hall, “How long do you think we’ll be sitting here?”

“I dunno. *You* calm down,” Sapnap tosses back to him. The sound of a six-pack in his hand clinking together announces his re-entry to the room; he sets them before Dream with a thud. “Live in the moment.”

The yellow-labelled cervezas stare back at Dream in bottled contempt, light drops of condensation sweating alongside the glass. His eyes lift to settle on Sapnap’s face.

“I’m not sure how much I like this moment,” he says.

“You promised.” Sapnap slides a beer from the cardboard and hands him a tacky “Gators” opener stolen from the kitchen. “Consider this a going away gift to me. Or no, a super early birthday present.”

Dream cracks open the bottle. Sapnap’s visible excitement is nearly as bubbly as the white foam that peeks out over the glassy ring.

“So I don’t have to get you anything, then?” Dream stalls.

“Just *drink* it.”

“You’re a wuss,” George says simply.

“Alright, alright.” Dream brings the bottle to his mouth. “Don’t rush me.”

He considers the cold beer in his hand; carbonation accidentally tasted as a child, being offered light swigs from friends, a scent on someone’s mouth before they leaned in. It has never matched him, not in the way it matches Sapnap and his growing stubble, or his father’s cigar smoke in amicable memories.

Dream tips the glass to draw a sip. The familiar rush of bubbles saturates his mouth, gliding over his tongue and down his throat. He remembers the bitter twinge of fizz as it settles uncomfortably in his stomach.

His eyes drift up. They’re both waiting for his reaction.

He smacks his lips together and says, “Still tastes like dirt.”

A sigh leaves Sapnap’s chest as he slumps back into his chair.

“Now who’s dramatic,” George says.

Dream helps pass a beer his way. “To be honest, it’s just not my thing.”

“To be honest, you are lame.” Sapnap holds his hands over the table as foam races down the neck of his bottle. When Dream nudges the stack of napkins towards him, however, his voice lowers. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Dream says warmly. “So, what is our plan here?”

Sapnap shrugs. “This. Relaxing. I dunno. But—” He nudges a board game with the half-wet end of his glass and pieces rattle inside. “We brought out these bad boys.”

“I heard about that,” Dream says. He glances at George’s briefly before looking away.

“Did you see this one?” Sapnap leans forward to tug out an older box, worn at the edges and undoubtedly missing cards inside.

“Oh, god. I probably haven’t played that since the last time you were here.” Dream takes another sip from the bottle and pulls a face. “I really have to finish this whole thing?”

“Yes. Then I’ll shut up forever.”

He frowns. “Have you met yourself, Sapnap?”

“I don’t think this kind is that bad,” George muses to his right.

Dream turns to see him idly sloshing the liquid in his glass back and forth. In the short period of time they’d been conversing, nearly half of George’s beer is gone. He watches him take another sip silently.

*Oh, Dream thinks. Okay.*

Sapnap gives him a look. Dream returns it.

“Tank,” Sapnap says.

“What?” George asks.

Sapnap shakes his head. “Nothing, George. What do you want to play?”

As they’re dragged into another civil argument over how to spend their evening, Dream eyes the brown glass in George’s hand curiously. He seems unfazed when taking sips between replies, but Dream doesn’t let his eyes linger on the soft sheen of his mouth, gleam in his eyes, sharp juts in his knuckles over the tall bottle more than he has to. Somehow, he looks older.

George catches his eyes once or twice, smiles, and says nothing of it. His heart races faintly in his ribcage as though tacked onto a schoolboy’s crush once more.

*Fine, then, Dream considers. Fine. Maybe it’s not so bad.*

He brings the glass to his lips again and a larger swig disappears down his throat.

“This—” A light burp interrupts Dream’s words, and he soothes knuckles over his sternum. “This is my last one. Seriously.”

Sapnap peers into the produce shelf of the fridge, features washed pale by the light’s chill. “We believe you,” he says. “Seriously.”

George huffs in amusement from his perch on the counter. The sleeves of his hoodie fall over his palms, a hand busy with the last of his bottle, the other propped behind him lazily.

When he’d set his first empty beer on the center of the table and reached for another, Dream reached for one, too. The taste grew more tolerable the less Dream focused on himself, and instead on how relaxed George seemed, louder and tongue sharper than usual, melting into his chair as they lost track of time. His cheeks have become a soft red; his eyes gleam dark above them.

Dream’s head has hardly been able to keep up with his own intrigue. Despite the light buzz between his ears, he considered himself to be normal when seated, until conversations grew loud, and energy rose, and all it took was an offer of a kitchen trip for them to leave the dining table behind.

A low rush to his stomach as he stood, slight tilt in his ears when he walked; his world has been mildly sideways ever since.

Dream leans back on the sink’s edge. He braces the counter to keep his balance in check, while the neck of his bottle presses against his chin.

“I don’t mind how it feels so far,” he mutters on the glass. “I just think these are gross.”

“Yet you’ve had three.”

Sapnap’s voice is cast back to Dream in a room he’s used to being empty, yet now, faint sounds crowd the space. George’s heels thump absently against the island cabinets. Large cans bounce together in Sapnap’s grip as he tugs them from the fridge, shelves cluttered by condiments and bottles.

Dream’s attention lands on the unopened orange juice before the door glides shut.

His eyes narrow.

“You might like some of the ciders in there more,” George offers, interrupting the direction of his thoughts.

Sapnap sets several tallboys on the counter pointedly. “Pussy shit.”

“Try one anyway, Dream,” George dismisses. “I put them on the list for you.”

Sapnap awws; Dream laughs with him.

“Did you really?” he asks.

George meets his gaze. He rose to eye-level when he’d hopped onto the counter in the first place; Dream thinks it feels purposeful of him to stay there ever since.

“I did,” George says.

His face warms into a quizzical smile. “What makes you think you know my taste that well?”

A light smirk is pressed unexpectedly from George’s lips. It’s dark outside, the only light cutting into the kitchen from the harsh fluorescents overhead, and his features are drawn darker because of it. He tilts his jaw slightly in familiar warning. It makes Dream’s chest and throat and head feel *warm*.

He takes a swig of beer to wash the sudden dryness in his mouth away. Luke-warm liquid floods past his teeth. An ignored ember in his skull is breathed into and catches fire, whispering, *I just want to get him alone*.

Guilt undermines Dream’s thoughts when Sapnap interrupts, “You’re such a baby about drinking new stuff. It’s not like I’d let it kill you.”

Dream’s eyebrows raise. “Oh, *I’m* the baby? You want to start that conversation right now?”

Sapnap squints dismissively while examining the contents of the heavy can in his palm. “Yeah, whatever, I wanna start that conversation right now.”

George pulls a can from the group, the sound of plastic peeling from aluminum collects in high-ceilinged corners, and Dream grins.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. Then what the fuck is up with you and the orange juice?”

Sapnap looks up as Dream’s arms cross over his chest. “Oh,” he says. “Nevermind.”

“*Dude.*”

“Chill.” Sapnap’s voice pitches. “It’s nothing. Literally nothing.”

“It’s clearly something,” George observes, and Dream points to him in agreement.

“It’s clearly none of your business.” Sapnap continues in a poorly mimicked accent, “How do you like that, George?”

Dream watches with amusement as George’s face falls blank. He hops off of the counter wordlessly.

“Come on,” Dream attempts as George passes between them. “Just tell us why. Who’s a little truth going to kill?” Sapnap’s mouth parts in response, and he rushes, “Don’t say my mom. You’re twelve.”

“Are you hiding, like, a secret allergy or something?” George questions.

“No.”

Behind Sapnap’s shoulder, the fridge door is torn open, and George’s hands waste no time pulling the carton from the shelf. Dream swears the drinks have managed to link their heads together, each thought and motion of George’s a mirror of his. He wonders if they’ve been like this since the strange beats of closeness in the hall the day before. He wonders how far it could go.

George seems to avoid his curious eyes on purpose.

Dream redirects his attention back to Sapnap, fidgeting visibly with the can, and sighs. “Then what is it?”

“What if I just don’t feel like talking about it?” Sapnap asks.

“After how you interrogated me yesterday? You’re joking.” George pushes the carton of juice towards him on his return. “Drink it.”

“Ew—god, why is it so sticky?”

“Just try it.”

Sapnap pushes away the box. “*No.*”

“I’m pouring you a glass,” George mutters.

Threads of an idea braid together in Dream’s brain as his eyes scan the clutter on the marble island. Unopened cans, his discarded keys, and a folded leather pouch with bills and papers crowded inside of it.

“Okay, wait, how about this.” Dream clears his throat. “If you don’t tell us, fine. Fine. But just because you’re being so *sketchy* about it, you have to shotgun that.”

He points. Their eyes fall to the tallboy can Sapnap had set on the counter. Larger than what they’ve had all night, forgotten to be placed in the fridge until ten minutes ago and cursed to a lukewarm temperature, the beer is a punishment fit for two.

A short bout of laughter leaves George’s chest immediately.

“*What?*” Sapnap’s eyes snap to Dream. “How is that fair?”

“I’ve asked no questions about the stuff on the list, *none*, this entire time,” Dream rushes as Sapnap’s mouth falls open in response. “I’ve earned *some* explanation, come on, Sapnap. Explain one thing. Come *on*.”

“No way,” he dismisses. “What do I get out of that?”

The glass of Dream’s beer bottle clacks gently against his teeth as he laughs into a sip. “Okay, okay—this—hear me out—this is the catch, alright? If you *do* tell us, and I mean really tell us, then *George* has to chug it.”

George’s grin is wiped away in seconds. “Why are you including *me*?”

“George, just—George, listen to me,” Dream continues through his amusement. “There’s no other way—”

“*You* do it.”

“There’s no other way he’ll agree to it!” Dream insists. “You know that. Don’t be silly.”

He offers up his warmest smile in recompense. As George reseats himself on the speckled counter, palms clasped onto the edge, his eyes pass over Dream’s face. They seem to rest on his teeth before quickly skipping away.

“Ugh.” Beneath flushed cheeks, George attempts to keep his mouth flat. “Fine. Fuck you.”

The brightness lingering in Dream’s chest expands, pressing against his ribs, hopeful and red. *How*, his brain offers, rapidly studying George’s face, *how did that work?*

“You’ll chug it?” Sapnap asks warily.

“I will,” George forces out.

“Great.” Dream clasps his palms together. “It’s settled, then.”

Sapnap scowls and reaches forward to tug Dream’s hands apart. “No no no, none of *that*, I still haven’t agreed to anything. You’re so annoying like this. I’m cutting you off.”

“This night was your idea in the first place,” George reminds him.

““Kay, no, Dream is the one who made that bet originally,” Sapnap defends, “and surprise surprise, look who couldn’t keep his dirty hands off you for more than *one* week—”

“Hey,” Dream interrupts sharply. “My hands are clean.”

The sound of George laughing fills the white-walled kitchen and feeds into Dream’s grin. It’s funny, he’ll take it, but it’s not *that* funny—George’s face faintly tinting, smile lines lifting with familiarity, attempting to be hidden behind the back of his palm. He drinks in the triumph with a following sip from his glass.

Sapnap leans back into the counter. “I’m not chugging that. I’ll puke.”

“Sucks to suck,” George says.

Dream’s mouth twitches, but he attempts to keep his composure. George sees it, he knows, with the way he glances at him and huffs lightly. The fuzz in Dream’s head and restlessness in his hands makes him wish he had an excuse to be closer.

“It’s us or the beer, Sapnap,” Dream utters gravely. “Which is it gonna be?”

Sapnap stares at them, then casts his eyes up high to the ceiling above. When he extends a hand for the keys George has been fiddling with in his lap, they’re passed his way wordlessly.

He punctures a hole in the base of the can.

Dream’s eyebrows raise. “I didn’t think you’d actually—”

“Chug,” George orders with glee.

The crack of the aluminum seal slices through the room, and Sapnap tips the can’s side against his mouth. Audible gulps force their way down his throat as a grimace takes over his face. Dream knows he’s never been good at chugging anything—sodas over calls in middle school, water races to prepare for recording videos—and is thoroughly amused to see his lack of skill hasn’t changed.

Beer courses over Sapnap’s jaw and streams from his chin. George is delighted.

“You’re getting it everywhere!” His laugh is infectious, Dream watches it leave his lips fondly. “Look—look at the *floor*.”

Sapnap pulls his mouth away from the can. “Shut—” He burps, violently, and brief pain is winced across his features. “Shut up.”

Liquid sloshes in the large can and dribbles onto the ground. Dream makes a note to wipe it up before Patches acquires a taste for it.

“You gotta finish.”

“Don’t wanna,” Sapnap forces out. “Seriously, Dream. Don’t make me.”

Pity settles in his chest. When he’s considering the fiasco to have been enough hazing for one night, and his mouth parts to give in, George offers, “I’ll finish it for you right now if you tell us.”

Sapnap’s fist thumps lightly against his chest. He holds the can before him timidly, eyeing the sharp opening with disdain, and glances up.

“He will,” Dream supports wholeheartedly.

Sapnap frowns. “I don’t like how you’re teaming up against me right now.”

The reluctance in his voice and stain of beer droplets on his shirt sobers Dream slightly. Carefully, he asks, “Do you really not want to talk about it?”

Sighing, Sapnap brings the half-chugged beer down to his waist. “You’re gonna make fun of me.”

“I promise you, we won’t.” Dream glances at George. “I won’t.”

“We can trade if you want, Sapnap.” George takes the beer and holds out a cup full of juice he’d poured discreetly. “Drink this instead.”

Sapnap tries to keep it from sliding into his fingers as George lets go. “No, dude, no, what if—” His voice falters. “What if I don’t like it?”

Terse silence cuts at the end of his words. Sapnap’s jaw tightens at the slip, and as he retreats into busily studying the cup, Dream’s eyebrows draw together. Beyond their apparent lack of insight, his head offers up nothing.

“What *if* you don’t like it?” he questions.

“A lot of people don’t like it,” George adds.

“I know. I know that, but—” Sapnap exhales. He taps on the translucent edge of the glass, his fingernail noisily contemplating the pause, before he continues, “But someone I care about likes it a lot.”

Dream’s lips press together in restraint.

“What?” George asks.

Dream glances at him. He knows Sapnap needs a gracious pause, but his words threaten to spill out. The list of people outside of this room that qualify for who Sapnap cares about is short, to say the least.

“Yeah,” he agrees anyway, repeating, “what?”

“It’s a whole family thing for them,” Sapnap continues hurriedly, “making orange juice and baking desserts or whatever. They have a lot of fond memories around it, like, growing up and stuff.” His voice cracks lightly. “And I’ve never wanted to like it! I’ve never liked it, even with Dream being from stupid Orlando and all, but I... I want to like the things they like. If I don’t, then it feels like maybe—maybe I’m not supposed to be family. Or anything close to it.”

The softness in his tone, candid warmth behind his eyes, a casual loosening of his shoulders from

when he began to speak—Dream can hardly believe it. In the warm silence, he can't find words to voice it.

He's never seen his best friend in love before.

“Does... that make sense?” Sapnap looks between them earnestly.

Slowly, George says, “No.”

“Okay, of course *you* wouldn't get it.”

George scoffs. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Sapnap rolls his eyes. “You're too stubborn, that's what I mean. When's the last time you tried to change for somebody else?”

“Why...” George frowns quizzically. “Why would anybody do that?”

Juice sloshes against Sapnap's glass when he sets it down in exasperation. He glances at Dream while gesturing to George. “Can you help me out here?”

The thoughts in Dream's head slow the moment they both turn their attention to him. Satisfaction pricks in his chest, and he tries to keep it from reaching his smile.

“I think,” Dream begins lightly, letting the warmth in his voice fall even, “you should try the juice, Nick. You're not going to know how you feel about it until you do, right? Simple as that.”

Sapnap's eyes fall and narrow at the glass on the counter. “But what if it tastes like ass, and I hate it?”

Dream shrugs. “Then it tastes like ass and you hate it. But at least you tried, and now you know, and you won't be stuck in between anymore.”

As Sapnap falls silent in consideration, he hopes his words reach him. Curiosity hops on his tongue, assisted by his decreasing filter, but he doesn't push.

“I disagree,” George mutters quietly.

Dream's gaze snaps to him. “What?”

He glances up. “I mean, it—it seems like it could make things worse if it goes wrong, right?” George's eyes cement to Sapnap only. “Maybe it's best if you don't try it. Things are good for now, so you should keep it that way. Stay where you're safe, you know?”

Sapnap hums. “This is true.”

“Well, no, actually.” Dream straightens from his lean on the counter behind him. “Cause then you'd just be *avoiding* something that you know is important for you and this, um, person.” He clears his throat. “And that's not like you, Sap.”

“This is *also* true,” Sapnap mumbles, brows knitting together.

Dream's eyes slide towards George. As though he feels it, George meets him halfway without a moment's hesitation.

“What if he regrets it, Dream?” George asks, voice barely lower than before but different enough

to catch. "You really think it's better to risk it and know, than to not know at all?"

Dream's heart races in his chest. "Wouldn't you live with regret either way?"

He feels it, he lingers on it. They both know they're not talking about Sapnap anymore.

He can't read George's face; eyebrows slightly pinched together, lax jaw with the part of his lips, on the brink of consideration or hesitation that are too muddled to decipher. The difficulty burns and entices him.

George's eyes flick down his face, briefly. The breath held in Dream's chest escapes him in the silence.

"You guys are confusing me," Sapnap says.

Dream blinks himself back to the conversation. Sapnap seems to be half-studying the cup with intrigue and reluctance.

"Drink it," Dream says. "There's obviously a reason you keep making me buy it. Some part of you wants to, so you should just get it over with." George lets out a disbelieving huff, and Dream waves at him dismissively. "And, *and*, even if you don't like it, I bet this person will appreciate the gesture of you trying anyway."

"They would," Sapnap rushes, his words clipped awkwardly. "They don't mind at all, actually, it's just—just me. My head."

Dream's lips press together in a sympathetic smile. Before he can try to offer more comfort, George lifts the cup from the counter. Dream's surprise rises with the scent of clementines in the air.

"Then here." George hands it towards Sapnap with ease. "For your head."

Sapnap tosses them both a hesitant, bitter glance. His fingers wrap slowly around the wide glass, and after swirling the contents inside dramatically, he tips the juice into his mouth.

He glances away from Sapnap's face to avoid seeing it—regret, or possibility—but when his eyes land on George, he sees one of the two anyway.

The cup lowers with Sapnap's wrist. George waits a second too long before looking back to gage his reaction. A phantom tang of bittersweet oranges floods Dream's mouth.

*Possibility.*

Sapnap sets the cup loudly on the marble. "I think," he says, "I—I need to—I'm gonna—"

"Go," Dream finishes.

As he leaves the room in haste, Dream sees his hand withdraw his pocketed phone. He smiles.

"I honestly can't tell if he liked it or not," George mutters once Sapnap is well out of earshot. He frowns lightly at the assaulted tallboy still held timidly in his hand.

Dream reaches to lightly tip the can up in loyalty to the deal. "I don't think that's what matters here at all."

"Oh," George says as Dream's fingertips guide the unfinished booze towards his face. "And you

know everything, do you?"

A smirk fights its way up Dream's face. He clears his throat, hand falling from the can just as it's pressed to George's lips. "You know, you've had quite the attitude tonight, George. What's up with that?"

"Please. Says *you*." George takes a hearty sip from the side. "All that, 'try it so you'll know,' and 'get it over with'—really subtle. Idiot."

Dream grins at him. *Alone and possibility*, his head swims in the whirlpool of thoughts, *alone, possibility, alone, possibility*.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says warmly.

George laughs. "Sure you don't."

Dream motions for George to continue finishing Sapnap's beer and earns a reluctant eye-roll. "I was just encouraging him to go after something he *obviously* wants already. What's that got to do with you and me?"

"I never said it had to do with us," George mutters, teeth against metal.

Dream's eyebrows raise. "That doesn't sound like you disagree."

In blatant avoidance, George's head tips back to chug the remains of the drink. His unshaven jaw juts sharply above the rise in his throat; Dream admires down to the disappearance of his neck below hoodie strings. He blames it almost entirely on the booze.

"I think you need to answer my question," he says as George pulls the empty can down.

Slightly out of breath, George wipes his mouth on the back of his sleeve before bunching the cuffs at his elbows. "I think you know the answer and just want to hear me say it."

Dream's mouth lifts into a gentle smile, and he pulls his bottle back into his hand. "Humor me."

George looks at him. Dream's head finds familiarity in the confusing blues of this; glancing at the tile floor sprawled between them, the stillness of the air during their pauses, George's attention continuing to fall back to him all night. His fingernails pick nervously at the torn label on the glass.

He clears his throat. "Let me make it easier on you." Leaning off the counter and stepping away from the sink, Dream turns to rest next to George, no longer facing him. "There. Now I'm not looking. That helps, right?"

He glances to his left in time to catch George's smile before it's forcefully pressed away. The metal can in George's hands is crushed into jagged folds. Droplets spill onto his sweats; he wipes them off absently.

George slides his knee on the bend of the counter to press against Dream's hip. "Your breath smells like beer," he dismisses, and hands off the can.

Dream discards the mess of metal next to his bottle and passively lets his elbow rest against George's thigh on the return. They pretend to not be touching at all. "Why are you smelling my breath?"

“Because you’re breathing on me.” George grimaces as Dream proceeds to blow warm air across his nose. “Oh, *gross*. St—stop—” Light palms push Dream’s jaw away, he raises warm fingers in defense. “*Stop that.*”

Their hands fall linked together as the shared giggles subside. George’s fingertips brush his abdomen, and his knuckles connect scarcely to George’s knee.

“Oh no,” Dream feigns in a murmur. “Would you look at that?”

George gives his hand a light squeeze. “Drunk you is an idiot.”

“Drunk you still hasn’t answered me,” he counters. He peers at George and repeats, “What did that juice conversation make you think about?”

George stares at him. “That has got to be the stupidest question I’ve ever heard you ask.”

“Alright.” Dream lets go of George’s hand light-heartedly and drops it to the marble. “Fine, then.”

“Ugh, okay, wait—” George grasps his fingers as they’re retreating, and gives Dream a rush of triumph when he finally reconnects with his gaze. “It’s a stupid question because it made me think of...” The fracture in his voice could easily be masked sober, but fails to remain hidden now. “Of something stupid. There.”

Warmth saturating Dream’s bloodstream begins to ooze into his brain, coaxing him to lean off the counter and towards the center of George’s vision. With their distance cut in half and the look of George at a convenient height before him, the room feels as though it’ll cave in the center.

Dream pulls George’s hand forward through the slow moving air, and tucks their knuckles under his chin. His voice rumbles quietly in his throat against them. “*How stupid?*”

“Very stupid,” George breathes. His eyes pass down Dream’s face. “I’d regret it.”

He can feel every shift in George’s fingertips under his jaw, absent nudges from the soft fabric of socks on the side of his thighs; how the cold edge of the counter seems to be the only thing separating them. Dream’s hips lean forward between the bend of George’s knees.

They’ve never been more alone than this, even with the house not entirely theirs. Not yet.

“I don’t want to be someone you regret,” Dream murmurs. His gaze rakes over George’s dark eyes, the tint on his cheeks, where pale skin turns to soft lips and barely audible breaths.

George’s voice lowers. “Then don’t try to kiss me.”

Dream’s teeth sink into his cheek. They’ve danced around it long enough, and the words fall from George’s mouth, soft like a breeze on sand whispering “*kiss me.*”

“There is a very pretty boy sitting on my counter,” Dream says breathlessly. “You can’t blame me for wanting to.”

He watches George’s cheeks flood pink. The forefinger grazing Dream’s stubble stretches out, up, along his jaw in exploration.

“You can’t keep getting away with that,” George whispers.

He tilts his head, lets George’s touch rise to his cheekbone, and tries to not have any shallowing breaths sweep him away. “With what?”

“Complimenting me,” George mutters. “Someday I might return one and it’ll give you a heart attack.”

His eyebrows raise with the uptake of his pulse. “Oh, really?” The light smile that George attempts to hide gives Dream enough bravado to ask, “Could I kiss you then?”

George’s dark eyes flick to meet him again, and he answers fondly, “No.”

“*George*,” Dream complains and immediately receives quiet laughter. “What is it? Is my breath really that bad?” He cups George’s palm over his mouth and breathes into it. “Or is it my face? Because you texted Sapnap that you *enjoyed* looking at it, and that was *days* ago, so—”

George’s palm flattens over his mouth. “Shut up.”

“*Make* me,” Dream muffles.

The hands on his face drop with a half-amused huff. Their fingers slide apart slowly, lingering on knuckles, lightly skimming wrists.

“What if I just don’t want to?” George questions. “How about that?”

Dream brushes his thumb up the inside of George’s forearm. “Oh, I’d respect that wholeheartedly.” He reaches the bend of his elbow, and his touch slips away to pluck his beer bottle from the counter at George’s side. “If I believed you.”

Dream smiles against the lip of the glass. George glowers at him.

He lifts a confident palm between them to wrap over Dream’s knuckles, curling flush on the bottle, and his fingertips graze up to take the beer from Dream’s grip entirely.

Words of resistance rise in Dream’s throat but dissipate before he can think to breathe. George tips the glossy ring of the bottle against his mouth, and the base tilts upwards slightly with his jaw, liquid sliding until it empties from brown glass to soft lips.

George swallows. Harsh overhead lights glint off the surface, his eyes, the dark swoop of his brows. A low hum rises from Dream’s chest before he can temper it.

“My spit was on that,” he says.

George sways the empty bottle in his grip with indifference. “Tastes fine to me.”

A hot exhale rushes from Dream’s nose as his eyes slip down George’s face. He can see the thin line of glistening light on the curve of his bottom lip, feels the thoughtless urge to run a thumb across it, and blinks heavily.

Before he’s aware of the reach, his hand completes the motion. His forefinger tucks gently beneath George’s chin, the calloused print of his finger skims along the softness of George’s mouth, dragging warm lips with the unexpected touch.

George doesn’t move.

“Is it better than the beer?” Dream hears himself saying, voice unable to rise past a low mumble.

He doesn’t hear George breathe.

“I...” George exhales in a wordless stutter, following every centimeter of Dream’s movement

before his eyes lift. They're wide and illuminated by pinpricks of fluorescents; Dream knows he's never been looked at this way by him before. "I'm not... sure."

Dream's touch drags over beneath George's cheekbone, breaths shallowing in his chest. The buzz in his head carries the words out for him. "Then maybe you should try more of both."

"But this is empty," George says quietly.

He feels the cold bottle pressed against the center of his chest, with George's knuckles digging into his sternum around it. His eyes stagger down and as George's head dips to follow him, their foreheads bump lightly together.

"You're the one still holding on to it," he murmurs. George's thumb swipes across his t-shirt, and his hand lightly pulls his jaw closer on instinct.

"I'm being compassionate." George's voice is faint enough to disappear. "For your hands."

Dream huffs; his breath rebounds. "You're a little obsessed with my hands."

"You're a little obsessed with me," George counters in a clipped breath.

"George."

"Yeah?"

Dream's brows pinch together. Fabric of his shirt slips into George's grasp. They share the same air as distance depletes between them.

"If you're *trying* to make me want to kiss you," he warns, "it's working."

George's mouth presses into a thin line at the seize in his chest, but his fingers grow tight on Dream's collar. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," Dream mutters. "You're just too scared to admit it."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"No, I'm *not*," George insists, leaning forward in agitation, "and just because you convinced Sapnap to be an idiot doesn't mean you can make me—"

Dream's palm slides up to cup his jaw, and he pulls gently. He sinks his mouth to George's cheek just above his jaw, scarcely catching the corner of his lips, hands trembling with the heat of a live wire. The warmth of George's breath is fresh on his skin, and fingers slide into his hair. It's an almost kiss, not enough, still yearning, but Dream gives it everything.

George leans the entirety of himself into it. Their chests bump together, his hand curls into Dream's shirt, head tilting at the ferocity of such softly placed lips. His fingernails graze through Dream's hair, his scalp, a wordless affirmation of want.

Dream's mouth lingers. Time withdraws.

His lips brush across George's cheekbone. He can feel eyelashes fluttering against his skin, and George's breath is warmer on his neck than he imagined it to be.

“Why,” George whispers, “did you—” His fingers twist in Dream’s collar. “—Do that.”

“To prove that I could,” Dream mutters in his ear. “That you *do* want it, that I’m not crazy.”

He tries to lean back slowly, but the hand on his head stops him. George’s words land against the curve of his cheekbone. “You *are* crazy.”

“George,” he breathes. “You’re pulling on me.” The fingers in his hair curl tighter, and Dream gets lost in the touch. He leans closer, guided in, jaw scraping across George’s stubble and mouth inches from his throat. Breath hot on his neck, Dream repeats, “George.”

“I...” George trails his fingernails through Dream’s hair. “I’m sorry.” His hand slides up from Dream’s chest to rest a forearm behind his shoulders. “I just—I’ve dreamt of this before, and—you’ve *got* to stop kissing me in this stupid kitchen.”

Dream’s hand spreads on the warm expanse of George’s thigh, forgotten when George reached for his shirt, and he squeezes the muscle suddenly. “Of this?” Dream’s words scrape out of his throat. “You’ve dreamt of this?”

George’s hands tremble. His arms cling to their closeness, nose tilting up to press against Dream’s temple. “You never kiss my mouth in my dreams, either.” His voice breaks in a half-laugh. “Pathetic, right?”

His brows draw together. George continues to ramble.

“It’s stupid, I know, and I don’t—I don’t know why I’m even telling you—”

“Where...” Dream’s thumb shifts on George’s jaw, and he feels the way his head tilts at the contact. His knuckles slowly turn, and drag, and run down George’s neck.

He wants to press his lips to the fluttering pulse on George’s throat. With the way that George’s hands pull timidly at his hair, he thinks they both share the twining thought.

“Here?” he mutters softly.

George swallows, and Dream traces the rise and fall of that, too. “Y—yeah.”

His hand wanders, fingernails grazing on the warm muscle on his neck until it meets with his collarbone. He imagines the feel of it under his teeth. “And here?”

“Dream,” George exhales.

“I just...” His fingers slide to gently wrap around the back of George’s neck. “I want to understand you. I’m trying to understand you.”

George’s ankles shift to hook quietly behind Dream’s thighs. “Trying to kiss me,” he corrects.

“Not on the mouth,” he argues in an aimless murmur. “It doesn’t count.”

“Doesn’t count,” George repeats faintly. “You’ve said that in my head, too.”

His heart pounds. He leans closer again, and George doesn’t stop him.

He presses his lips to George’s cheekbone. His ears ring with the gentle hitch he hears, and his upper back burns with the feel of light fingers grasping fabric upon it. Against George’s skin, he mumbles, “Did *that* count?”

George's jaw tips up slowly. "No," he says.

His mouth lowers down. He softly kisses George's face again where sharp bone descends to the edge of his jaw. Pinpricks of stubble scrape Dream's skin and he has the half mind to drag his lips across them. An exhale of warm approval blows on his neck.

"And that?" he murmurs.

George voices nothing. Dream squeezes his thigh lightly, and he hears a soft, repeated "no."

He isn't sure where his head escapes him to; a place of weightlessness, somewhere that doesn't matter. Somewhere that doesn't count. Caught in a dizzied haze of indulgence, assisted by liquid gold pooling in his stomach, his hand drifts to George's waist.

"Tell me," Dream breathes out. "Tell me when it counts."

George pulls him down against his throat. The fingers in Dream's hair guide, tremble, cup his head closer as he places his mouth to the smooth curve of George's neck. He kisses along the ivory skin with thinning restraint. His hands are warm. His head is warm.

A breath with winded voice pushes past George's lips. Dream's hand tightens on his hoodie fabric, thumb pressing into his abdomen and fingernails on his back.

His mouth drags up against the racing pulse beneath George's jaw, and lightly, he parts his lips and draws the skin towards his teeth. Thighs squeeze against the sides of his hips. Dream can hardly hear beyond the hum in his ears, the sound of his own heart; the hot course of his own breath. The hands on his scalp slip to cradle his face and pull his jaw upwards.

*Upwards.* Blindly, his lips tip up until they fall away from the taste of George's skin and hover over the heat of his mouth.

His breath pants warm against it. Hair trickles in front of his eyes. Dream can't see it, but he feels it, George's jaw growing loose in a hesitant part of his lips, and the slightest brush of his nose in an incline towards him.

His chest burns with his heart in rhythm. *Make it count. Make it count. Make it count.*

George's fingertips trace with caution over his mouth, the tears from his teeth and swollen shape of his lips. The feeling is featherlight. Dream's lower lip is dragged down by the fleeting touch of a thumb, one knuckle away from brushing against George's own.

*Let me make it count.*

Dream isn't sure if the words escape his throat, or if the murmured plea is imagined between them.

Footsteps from the hall break the barrier formed around them in their solitude. Loud and disruptive, they both flinch at the noise.

The hands that had continued to pull Dream closer slide to his shoulders and rapidly push him away. He barely catches a glimpse of the look on George's face before creating enough distance for the both of them. Warmth slips from his body, turning to busy himself in anything *other* than the buzz lingering on his lips.

*I didn't kiss him. He didn't kiss me.* He plucks the empty cans and bottles from the counter to toss,

hands shaking, head afire. *I could've messed it up, but I didn't*, he tells himself, *I could've, but I didn't, I could've, but I—*

“Okay!” Sapnap greets as Dream hurriedly takes a rag to the floor’s beer puddle. “Hello. Hi.”

“Hey.” His voice comes out uneven, and he clears it quickly to let it subside. A hum rattles through his hands as he desperately washes the cloth to cool them. “Uh, how’d—how’d your little phone call go?”

“Fantastic. I feel fantastic.” Sapnap rounds the island as Dream glances over his shoulder. “I’m on top of the moon, actually. Do you think we can—oops, sorry George—can we go somewhere, or something?”

His hands find the edge of the sink. He tries to forget the sting of George’s fingers pulling on his hair, the bated breaths that left his throat, how *easy* it seemed to to rewrite the careful bounds they’ve spent months constructing.

“Like what?” Dream forces himself to ask, hands lifting from the wet metal. “You want some fresh air?”

“Sure—”

“Yes please,” George answers.

Dream slowly shuts off the water streaming from the spout. Drops land heavily in the sink. He wonders if this is how George felt all the times he’d been the one left behind, regaining composure at record time, at ease and marveling at the other’s unravelment. For once, George has no words, tinted cheeks, acting as though Dream *had* stolen his breath from a connected kiss between lips instead of being undone by an *almost*.

He turns back towards them to find George’s eyes glued to his every motion, a hand candidly cupping the side of his throat, while a smile is plastered dazedly on Sapnap’s face.

Dream welcomes the change. The shift feels *wonderful*.

“Alright.” He shakes stray droplets from his hands. “I know somewhere we can go.”

Red radio towers blink in and out of existence above the sea of lights beneath them. Dream’s shoes sway over the darkness, and his eyes are fixed on the Orlando skyline as it dips into the curve of the ocean. Somewhere out there on the hidden water he’s sure a boat sways, pushed by gentle currents, a hint of storm drifting it towards his home.

A pause in the white noise of wheels rolling behind him accompanied by shouts and bright laughter has his gaze drifting over his shoulder. Beneath tall flood lights that illuminate wide circles across the parking lot roof, Sapnap pulls George along the borrowed skateboard by a firm clasp on his forearms.

Dream watches with a light smile as they spin in a lopsided loop, the board under George’s feet nearly missing loose bits of painted stone before he’s released forward in a beautifully straight line. Despite the wobble in his shoulders, tinted yellow by buzzing overhead bulbs, he stays stoically upright.

“You’re a *god*,” Sapnap howls.

George's hands stretch out beside him as their laughter carries up into the faded sky. They've been here long enough for more stars to slowly pierce their way through smog-ridden black, stealing from Dream's backpack of water and snacks, trying and failing to teach each other skate tricks on the board he'd advised them not to bring. They even spent a better part of an hour lying on the dusty ground, pretending to stargaze, and talking about nothing important at all.

He's only ever come here alone before. It's strange to fill an empty place with temporary beacons of familiarity.

They switch turns on the board again. Dream's eyes wander back to the view of glittering suburbia, silhouetted power lines, a polluted skyline and the radio towers. He stopped drinking once they got here, and the lights have blurred less in his vision since then.

"D'you have any more water?" George asks from behind him.

His head turns. George's camera bag is pinned across his chest again, despite Dream's warnings against bringing that too, and his shoulders rise and fall lightly out of breath beneath it. They haven't spoken much since the interruption from the kitchen counter. He feels the night is probably better off that way.

"You can have mine," he says, lifting the bottle from the concrete wall.

George takes it, and he leans elbows against the ledge. "I think—" he voices between sips. "We're giving him a good sendoff."

The wheels beneath Sapnap's feet catch on the gravel below with an irritating shriek. His confident mumble of recovery is heard moments after.

Dream chuckles. "I think we are."

Silence falls over them. His eyes slip down George's neck absently before glancing away.

"He seems a lot happier after drinking that stupid juice," George muses.

Dream hums in agreement. After a light pause, George slowly sets down the water and unzips the camera bag. With quiet curiosity, Dream watches him switch on the device, fingers flitting over settings, before tilting sideways to capture whatever it is Sapnap's way that catches his eye.

"I knew he would feel better if I got him to talk about at least *one* of the things on that list." Dream leans off of his hands, the jagged rock sinking patterns into the flesh of his palms. His thumbs soothe over them as he tests, "Seems my advice about getting things over with was right."

George glances up from the camera to side-eye him. "Easy."

A smile jumps to his face. "What? What's wrong?"

"You. You're trying to make me talk about something—" George snaps another quick photo as Sapnap rounds by on the board. "That I don't want to talk about, unless we're—"

"Wait, Dream."

"—alone," George finishes quietly. He gives Dream a pointed look before storing the camera away.

Dream's attention lifts off of him to see Sapnap stalled by the descending ramp to the lower level.

The crocs he'd borrowed from Dream's foyer are a putrid yellow against the pale concrete stone, one resting on the board patiently.

"How far down does this go?" Sapnap asks. His voice echoes slightly in the open mouth of the exit.

"I mean, they're not connected, but the ramps go all the way to the bottom," he answers hesitantly. "It does get super—hey, listen to me—it does get super dark in the middle so—" Sapnap begins to dip below the floor level and he raises his voice after him. "*Please* don't go too fast!"

He earns a half-wave in return. He sighs. George sighs.

"Oh," Dream says as he looks back at him. "Well, we're alone now."

George hops up to sit and shifts his legs to hook over the edge of the level. "I guess I'm out of excuses, then."

The gleam of city lights and poorly-lit mall rooftops sit in the dark of George's eyes, and a humid breeze ruffles his hair. A haze of smog or civilization glow rises just above the brown cotton of his shoulders. His face seems complicated; Dream wants to ask why.

"Do you..." He clears the tension in his throat. "Do you want to talk about what happened earlier?"

George's head turns. The back of his heels thump lightly against the building's exterior. "Do you?" he pushes, but his brows are tipped up with the caution in his voice.

"I don't know," Dream admits. He feels wayward, a little breathless, but the way George is mirroring him makes the unease tolerable. "I mean, I feel a little... clearer now than I did, like, two hours ago."

"Me too," George agrees quickly. He huffs when reaching for the plastic bottle between them. "Looks like your over-abundant water supply actually helped—"

His fingers slip and hit the container ungracefully, toppling it over the edge, and it sinks into the darkness before a light confirmation of collision resounds from the sidewalk meters below. The sound reverberates in the quiet of the night.

"Oh, god."

Dream begins to laugh. "*George.*"

"Okay, I take it back." George stares down over the edge. "Maybe I'm still a little out of it—" Dream's thinning breaths of amusement cause him to shove his shoulder. "Don't laugh."

"That was the last of our water," he complains warmly. "You're an idiot. Give me that." He lightly pulls George's palm away from his face between chuckles. "You don't know how to use it safely."

George's fingertips relax in his hand. As his touch slides up between Dream's fingers to link them together, it carries no trace of danger. It's a connection warmer than the night air on his skin, or where the cuffs of Dream's sweatpants clings to his calves. He holds on gently. His face continues to warm.

He isn't sure what to say, so he squeezes George's hand.

After a moment of silence, George squeezes back.

“It’s really pretty up here,” he says quietly.

The comfort of George’s voice aligns with the serenity of their view, and Dream lets out a light exhale. “I haven’t been in a while, honestly. I used to come all the time when I first moved out of my family’s place and didn’t know this area very well.”

“What stopped you?”

Dream shrugs. “All the lights look the same after a while.”

It’d been true before tonight, before he felt the breaths leave George’s throat, became cursed to remember his hands in his hair. Now the city appears before him as a glittering mirage, made of orange roads, leaving the familiar tang. It feels *possible*, with George at his side, to love or hate Orlando.

“Huh. I... I don’t know if you remember this,” George says, “but a while ago, like, a couple years ago I think, you said you had better stars here than I do back home. I asked you to send a picture for proof, and you took the *worst* photo I have ever—” Dream grins as George starts to laugh. “*Ever* seen. It was so blurry, but... I’m pretty sure it was of this view.”

Dream gently chuckles with him, and he withholds the confession that he *does* remember the picture, vividly enough to have brought them all here for that reason alone. He wanted George to see it for himself.

“So what’s the verdict?” Dream asks. “Are they better than in England?”

George gives his palm a light pinch. “Definitely not. But it looks nicer than it did in the pictures.” They drift back to the shared skyline, and his voice changes slightly. “That’s all I had for so long, you know. Your voice and those photographs.”

Something settles in Dream’s chest. His lips part silently.

George lets go of his hand and clears his throat. He rises to his feet on the wide ledge, leaving Dream’s knuckles to bump on the dusty surface.

“Where are you—” Dream shifts to place his feet back in the lot. “What are you doing?”

“I’m walking.”

Dream stands, hand lifting to float behind George’s back. “It’s a lot farther of a fall than it looks, George.”

George’s hand settles on his shoulder for balance. “You’ve got me,” he says. “I trust you.”

Dream wraps a hand at the base of George’s bicep firmly. He holds him steady as George continues to step forward, ready to pull him away from the edge at a moment’s notice, or even too strong of a breeze. As he’s leaned on, the weight feels intentional.

His head lingers on the photograph, a blurry night skyline, and imagines George gazing at it from thousands of miles away.

“Now that you mention that,” Dream muses aloud, “I think it’s time I admit how I expected you’d try to take, like, a gazillion photos of me the second you got here.”

George laughs shortly. “I expected you’d try to kiss the shit out of me the second I got here. Does

that make us even?"

Dream's face grows warm. The air is clear, and still, and the words are carried with a refreshing candor that does little to dispel his thoughts.

"Well," Dream says, considering the cold contrast of the kitchen counter, "*technically*—"

George's eyes snap to him. "Hey. That didn't count."

It takes Dream a moment to recognize the animation in his features is born out of humor, a joke, something light-hearted and meant to be smiled at. "Right, right," he rushes, frowning with similar faux concern. "It didn't count."

George smiles. As he continues to step forward, sneakers against stone, Dream's thumb swipes gently on his arm. It's strange to pass it back and forth as a warm-tongued secret, as though it hardly happened at all.

*Maybe that's how he does it*, Dream considers, watching George contentedly balance beneath the lamp's glow. *Pretending nothing is real*.

"We're okay, right?" Dream asks suddenly. "You're not upset?"

He stalls. "Upset? About—oh. No." George's free hand lifts to the side of his throat before passing it off as a nervous rub. "If anything, I'd be mad at me before I'd be mad at you."

Dream peers up at him, and they resume walking. "Okay... are you mad at yourself?"

A drift of wind carries up the sound of bugs in the nearby marshes, faraway engines disappearing down the roads, and the sound of Sapnap's wheels below them as he gradually grows farther away. He doesn't care for any of those noises, focused on the timid part of George's lips before he begins to speak.

"A little," he admits, and he gives Dream's shoulder a squeeze. "But not a lot." His eyes fall down to watch his steps. "I... I think it's a good thing it stopped when it did, though." He laughs nervously. "It's probably for the best that we didn't kiss before you're stuck with me for a week, right?"

"Yeah," Dream agrees faintly. "Right."

His paces slow until they're stopped again between empty parking spots. George glances back down at him; Dream's hand slips from his elbow to lightly hold his wrist.

"I feel like I keep saying this," Dream mutters slowly, "but I want you to make sure you know, so I'll say it again." He looks up. "Wherever you are in this, George—that's where I'll be, too. I promise. Nothing more and nothing less." His fingers gently press onto the veins on his arm, and the pulse there quickens. "Okay?"

George carefully steps down off the wall but his eyes don't break from Dream. The night cradles warmly around them.

He studies him for a silent moment, passing over Dream's face with a sinking frown. His voice falls quietly. "Why are you so patient with me when all I do is push you away?"

Dream's chest aches. He watches George's shoulders rise and fall in shallow, conflicted rhythm.

“Maybe... maybe you do,” Dream says. His eyes are heavy as they follow George lowering to sit again. “But every once in a while, you push a little less than you did before, and you let me in. Even though it might make you angry.” He carefully places himself on the ledge next to him. “Even though it scares you. You do so much for me even when it hurts, and anything else is—” He huffs with a glance at George’s throat. “Well, it’s whatever you want it to be.”

George’s jaw turns, and he gazes at him. “What about what you want?”

“I already have that,” Dream says gently.

A huff of hot air escapes George’s chest. “I don’t—I don’t know how you *do* that,” he forces out. “It’s not fair. All you have to do is say one thing, and everything seems easy. Everything makes sense.”

Dream blinks at him. “I’m... sorry—” he attempts to say, but George rescues his hand from solitude again. Near the corner of the multi-level lot, they can hear a faint hum of a nearby generator adding to the peace. Before they fall into silence, Dream offers, “I think that’s just because I talk too much.”

The lamplight overhead flickers into sudden darkness. Moments after the strange death of the bulbs, George lifts Dream’s arm to rest over his back. His palm spreads on George’s shoulder with warm, contended relief.

“I knew when I first met you that I’d never get over you,” George mutters. “Not really.”

Dream stares at the faraway lights on the horizon, heart pounding. “Yeah,” he says. “Me too.”

The sprawl of the city stretches out with connected webs of gold, roads and passing cars; a nightlife he’s never loved. Thoughts between his ears are quiet as wind passes through them. He tips his head back to examine the hard-to-see stars above.

Faint whoops carry up from levels below. He smiles to the dark sky as George laughs gently by his side.

“He’s still going?” Dream muses quietly.

“Guess so.” After a pause, any trace of amusement leaves George’s voice. “I can’t believe he’s leaving tomorrow.”

Dream frowns at the reminder he’s spent the better part of the last two weeks avoiding, knowing the muted feeling in his chest is meaningful, and knowing it means he’s going to miss Sapnap more than he’s bothered to put into words. He says nothing.

“You keep a really interesting list, you know,” George continues. “Most friends don’t care enough to notice as much as you do about him.”

Dream’s arm shifts on George’s shoulder, and he pulls him closer to his side. “It’s not just him. I notice things about you, too.”

George turns to look at him. His breath is close enough to land on his cheek. “Is that the list you didn’t want me to see?”

He’s surprised George cares to remember the wallet-dumping on the restaurant table from nearly a week ago. The fuzzied blue ink in a pile before their sloppy sandwiches is a memory Dream wouldn’t be keen on keeping.

“It is,” he admits.

“...What’s on it?”

Memories of writing descend in his mind, ink stains on his hands, listening to music to clear his head, speaking the words out loud to remind himself how, paper folds, paper cuts, paper lists. “It’s hard to explain,” he says timidly. “It’s not like the other ones.”

He feels George’s eyes on him until they slip away. He lowers his head to rest on Dream’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to explain it.”

The warm hearth settled between Dream’s ribs is breathed into without warning. “Thank you.”

His palm rises to cup George’s head as soft hair brushes against his neck. Blunt nails trail through the brown strands with ease, intentionless. The wind shifts somewhere in the palm leaves beyond them.

“Do you think Sapnap is dead by now?” George asks suddenly. “I can’t hear him anymore.”

Dream laughs, jostling George’s face on his shoulder, who proceeds to giggle lightly with him. “Oh, god. He probably is.”

“You think we should go check?”

“Yeah,” he says through a sigh. “Yeah, definitely. Being alone in this lot is never all that much fun.”

As they slowly untangle from each other, hands passing on shoulders and arms falling away, a visceral sense of calm floods from Dream’s chest down to his gut. His throat feels coated with honey. His eyes pass over George and his soft smile, his ears ring with the sound of his voice, and the expansive feeling grows.

“God,” he breathes.

George looks at him. “What?”

“It’s nothing really, I... I was just thinking about how I used to come here alone all the time,” Dream says. When George patiently stays quiet, he continues, “I’d sit in my car by myself for hours and watch the lights blink on those towers over there. I even came to see fireworks for the Fourth one year when my family was out of town, and nobody was with me then, either.” His eyes scan the empty lots, the faded white lines, passing over old oil stains to drift back to George. Always, he drifts back to George. “But... I’m realizing I was never actually alone. I always called you.”

He reaches to gently pull George’s hand to his cheek. A soft expression slowly sinks across George’s face as he says, “Really?”

“Yes. We’d talk on the phone here for hours, George. For years. Isn’t that crazy?” Dream grips his hand tighter as he steps down to the lot, and George smiles at him without hesitation. “I can’t believe I forgot about that. And I’m sorry I—I wish I knew where this was coming from—” His brows draw together in confusion for his own words as they slip by his teeth. “But I’m so happy that you’re here. Really. I don’t think I’ve said that enough. I *love* that you’re here.”

He gazes down, and George's wide-eyed stare looks back up. Dream doesn't care for the fear—his jaw is loosened by joy.

"You're everything to me, George," he breathes. His heart roars in his ears. "No matter what, I think you always will be."

The light flush on George's face makes his words ring true, and the slight shine in his eyes makes the adoration in his chest beat louder. He looks up at Dream wordlessly, lips parted. He floats his trembling hand from Dream's cheekbone to pass through his hair, and Dream feels himself *beam* as a grateful huff pushes past his lips.

"You don't have to say anything," Dream continues in a murmur. "I just wanted you to know."

Warm hands pull down on his neck, and George kisses him.

His breath locks in his chest. His ribs burn. Unmoving, unthinking, his palms are suspended low in the air beside George's shoulders until he gives in to the floating feel of helium in his veins.

His hands rise to gently cup George's jaw. Lips press with surprised softness to the curve of his mouth, and Dream carefully kisses back. Elation and disbelief tangle as the fleeting seconds slip by, the heat of George's mouth coaxing him further into both, unsure of *how* it's happening, unsure that it'd *ever* happen.

Dream feels when George's lips slowly withdraw, and the trembling of his exhales rushes to take its place. Briefly parted and trying to hold him here longer, and longer, and longer, Dream connects their lips again.

George's body tips into him as his jaw inclines with ease. Warmth builds in the slowness of their gentle collision. Hands slide into Dream's hair, palms pull George closer; they somehow pretend it's their only chance to be here before isolation becomes of them again, and they somehow know there's a chance that this is all they'll ever have.

A sharp inhale cuts between them in a sudden break away. Dream anticipates the fall in his chest. Shock sinks into his bones and leaves him a non-breathing mess, forehead resting on George's head as unsteady hands sink into his shirt, and words fail.

Silently, painfully, they fail.

"I..." George's forehead slumps to rest on his collarbone. Breath blows across Dream's chest, and his hands cling to the cloth on his shoulders. "I got it over with."

Dream's throat is tight. "You..."

George's voice trembles alongside his hands. "I had to get it over with," he whispers.

*You said, he can't voice, it was a good idea that we didn't.* His wrists rest uneasily on George's shoulders as he feels fingernails press into his sternum. Nerves in Dream's chest collide and he's sure George can feel the drumming in his ribs as he breathes out, "Why?"

George's words are hot on the cotton of his shirt. "I don't know."

"You don't... know," Dream repeats slowly.

The lights nearby watch them with indifference as they stand in the shadow of the unlit lamp overhead. If the entire lot were to spit quick sparks of electricity before falling pitch black in the

night turned morning, perhaps they'd belong. Not scared of the dark, not sure of it either.

George pulls his head away from Dream's chest the moment he hesitantly raises a hand to cup it, but the movement comes with slight relief. He's not sure what the touch would do.

George's fingers press over his own mouth where Dream's lips had been, unreadable once more, trembling still. He wants to wrap his touch around George's wrist and pull the ghosting hand away.

Several stories below, they hear a telltale scrape of a skateboard stopping on concrete ground.

"I made it!" Sapnap's triumphant yells echo up to them from the bottom of the parking garage. Dream's jaw tightens. George's eyes flutter shut. "Uh, did somebody drop their water bottle?"

Frozen on a warm night, the lights of the city blink out into approaching autumn beyond them, and they don't say a word.

#### Chapter End Notes

hiiiiiiii

I had to upload chapter 9 on 9/09... c'mon <3 hope you all enjoy this update, I know it's been a long while but I wanted to make sure I felt good about what I had given it's been tough to bring myself to continue. can't tell y'all how many different versions I wrote of this but I am very very happy to have completed it :) the rooftop scene has been in my head for an extremely long time now, & I felt such ease and adoration when finishing it so I hope it reaches you guys that way too <3 thank you for the comments, for everyone who encourages me on and for everyone who tells me they'd accept it if my heart wasn't in the story anymore. the support has been crazy and I have much love for all of you who inspire this hobby of mine - thank you especially to ari for their creative genius, and to zach for the needed beta help

no clue when the next chapter will be! who knows when this story will ever finish. if you're racing for the end or feel like it's dragging on and want finality, then I have to apologize because I don't think this is the right fic for you (pls explore ao3 and give this love to other authors!) I appreciate you if you're in it for the long haul, and it's totally okay if you're not. I didn't think I'd get this far, am still writing like a year later, and I expect life to get in the way but I'll keep trying!

# Animal

## Chapter Summary

Dream and George are left to collide with the fate of their friendship head on.

## Chapter Notes

Helloooo folks. Long one so buckle up and stay hydrated, hope you've been well :)

Content warnings for this chapter (pls read before if you're sensitive to this material) // panic attacks, mentions of blood, mentions of wounded animal.

Happy reading. Stay safe. Love u all.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Silence carries out into the open air. The night sky turns slowly above Dream's shoulders.

*That was the one.* His ears ring. His thoughts ring. *That was the one, wasn't it?*

His eyes don't leave George's face as pale palms stretch to cover it whole. Soft lips disappear behind sharp knuckles, tinted cheeks below set brows suddenly ripped from his vision.

*Wasn't it?*

The heartbeats in his throat tighten around any urge to push out thoughtless words. His mouth burns cold. Sapnap's wayward shouts fell to the buzzing of a phone call in Dream's side pocket moments ago, replaced soon after by accidental clanging of skateboard trucks against railings in the stairwell. His hands didn't dare reach for his glowing screen then; nothing but the rise and fall of his shallow chest moves now.

"That..." Dream's voice is grating, and he clears his throat to force the words from him. "That was the one that counts."

A beat of nothingness passes. The gnarled nerves in his chest tangle further.

George's hands slip down his face. Leaned back against the concrete ledge, his elbows draw close to his sides, and he curls his fingers into the cloth of his collar. He nods slowly, but doesn't lift his eyes.

A warm exhale flees Dream's lips. The soles of his shoes feel misplaced on dry-dusted stone, yet despite himself, the elation in his chest spreads into his brain.

"I—I don't understand," Dream breathes. George's eyes fall shut again. "You said—"

"Clay," he whispers.

Dream's face drops. Something in him splits underneath the ribonned bolt of hearing his own name, his core splintered open; left to become a burning pyre. It sounds familiar, like the moments on call when George fell into the depths of himself, when his voice shook enough to make Dream's ears strain for inaudible hiccups of tears, and he whispered, "*What are we supposed to do, at this distance, with our different lives?*"

"This is scaring me." Dream's voice wavers as he searches George's face. "You're starting to freak me out. Please say something else."

He earns nothing but the slowing of a breeze into still air. The blunt edge of his fingernails curls into his palms; familiar crescents, age old wounds. Acid pools in the low swoop of his gut.

"You can't say nothing. You can't just kiss me and say *nothing*."

"I don't—" George cuts himself off in a sudden inhale. Slowly, he proceeds, "Have words... to say." His eyes are closed, brows knitted together in a tense frown. "I don't have words. I don't. I didn't."

"You... didn't?" Dream echoes.

*You didn't have words*, he pieces together the spaces of George's thoughts.

"That—that's—" George huffs. He tugs the collar of his shirt over his jaw, knuckles pressing to his mouth again.

Dream watches the motion with concern. "That's... why?" he finishes. "You're saying that's why you..."

*Got it over with. Made it count.* His head skips around their guarded words. *Kissed me. You kissed me, George.*

More quiet blankets the rooftop lot, broken only by faint echoes of faraway shoes scuffing the gum-spotted ground. Sapnap's occasional humming floats off the walls of the stairwell in a mimicry of how the three had arrived at the parking garage, trudging together in a collection of tone-deaf notes, the night full of possibility and noise.

He stares at George in the uncertainty they've created.

*You kissed me and you don't know why. You know you didn't have the words.*

"I didn't say all those things to make you do it," Dream says helplessly. "I didn't—in the kitchen—touch you to *make* you—"

"I know." George's hands loosen their grip on his shirt, and his eyes open to watch them uncurl. Quieter than before, he repeats, "I know."

Dream's heart pounds. Even though George has yet to meet his eye again, there is nothing angry in the brittle air between them. He slowly leans against the shared wall with distance from George's side, passing a glance over his suspended fingers, while George stares like he can see through bone.

"Are you... alright?"

George's hands drop to his sides blankly.

“Obviously you’re not,” Dream corrects himself. “*I’m* not. But I need to know where your head is.”

George sighs heavily, palms moving to brace the wall on either side of him. Shadows from lampposts draw down the back of his neck.

Dream’s gaze drifts forward to the stretch of parking spaces before them. His own words tossed out of him between the walls of his therapist’s office echo back.

*“What if I still make the wrong choices, after everything? What if I’m the one who messes it up?”*

Hours over summer of readying himself for their September trip didn’t prepare him for a modicum of this; George reaching back, George pulling first, George’s lips on his. The freshly burned knowledge of the shape of his mouth and the softness it gives roars loud between his ears. He’s committed time and time again to being content with wherever they are, whatever George gives him, but the rich hope coursing from his chest clings to the memory with force.

He’s never been kissed in a way that means everything and nothing at all. Any time he’s tacked his lips to someone warm or they’ve guided his breath away, the connected kiss was embedded with a promise, an obligation for something beyond it, like he negotiated part of himself away by giving in.

Yet George kissed him with simplicity, with presence. They shared the same heartbeat for a full, fleeting, meaningless moment.

Nobody has ever been there with him before.

Dream’s hands are simmering as his eyes drop down to the painted parking lines. Nerves rattle in his chest, pinpricks and bumps rising across his forearms. He hopes and he worries, until he hears a reply push past George’s teeth.

“I can’t believe I did that.”

He doesn’t think or move. He doesn’t like the edge he hears; resounding possibility flipped upside down.

*Disbelief, disbelief.* “What do you mean?” Dream’s head turns to stare, and George says nothing. “George, what does that mean?”

“Sapnap can’t know,” George dismisses hurriedly. “If we fight then he’ll know, and I can’t have him know.”

“Is—is that what you’re worried about right now?” His eyes search George’s face rapidly. “About him?”

George floats a hand to brace his abdomen. “Dream,” he warns.

“Why are you thinking about him after what just happened?” he pleads, voice raw. “How can you think about *anything* else after—”

“*Stop it,*” George snaps. The bite in his tone loosens as it rings out; he exhales unsteadily. “Please, just stop. I told you I can’t do this. We can’t fight.”

Dream recoils and his thoughts come with him. *Not like this, not like this*, his head resounds. *Anything but this.* His attempt to keep the bitterness in his gut from rushing to his mouth fails, and his jaw slackens.

“Bullshit, ‘we can’t fight,’” he spits. Ignited rejection crackles in his tone. “Bullshit you ‘can’t do this’—what did you *think* would happen, George?”

George’s fingers curl into his stomach. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

The words catch on an edge in Dream’s already splintered chest, and the burn climbs up his throat. “Sick because you kissed me?” he breathes out in disbelief. “Or sick because you *meant* it?”

*I wish we were sober.*

George shakes his head silently. Dream watches his hand tremble as the back of it raises to cover his mouth.

*I wish you’d look at me.*

*Look at me.*

“*Look at me.*”

George’s eyes lift at the break in his voice. Their gazes meet in the humid air and all smells of gasoline. Cracks in the concrete ground seem fractured less than George’s expression; eyes dark with tar, gaunt as a ghost, yet still with a flush to his cheeks that Dream knows his own lips put there.

For a moment, Dream sees him. George mirrors his uncertainty, his panic, with softening eyes and a taut jaw. His own palms cupped the face before him minutes ago; his own mouth kissed warm secrets down exposed skin.

Hundreds of words flood to his tongue—beg George to talk, ask him to listen, or furiously demand both—but he falls unexpectedly quiet.

Dream’s lips part. Nothing slips from them.

“*Talk,*” he recalls Dr. Lauren’s voice. “*Talk it dead.*”

“*What if I can’t?*” he’d mused lightly in response, somewhere in August. “*Or, what if—I don’t know—what if they don’t deserve it?*”

George stares at him wordlessly. He realizes they’re both waiting for his thoughts to spill out of him.

“*Then don’t push yourself, Clay. Listen to what is in your gut. If you can’t speak, or shouldn’t speak, your body will know.*”

His jaw sets in the silence. He leans back, shoulders shifting down with a release of breath through his nose. Tension embedded between strands of muscle and grating bone flees him as he lets his speechless decision ring.

George’s eyes widen. Dream feels the ground fall even.

*I know this one,* he thinks. *I know his fear when I see it.*

The sound of Sapnap’s jogging steps up the stairs echoes loud enough to make their eyes break away, and Dream welcomes the intrusion. He moves head first into it, turning away from George to see his friend blessed with ignorance of their half of the night.

“Could you hear me?” Sapnap asks, winded as Dream approaches him. The board is tucked under his arm. “From down at the bottom?”

His throat is clawed from leaving George, from being kissed, from falling silent. A new voice is a clean break in the roaring swell of their time alone.

“No,” Dream lies. “We couldn’t.”

Sapnap tsks. “Darn. Thought so. You should’ve seen how fast I was going at first, though. I almost wiped out around, like, the fourth floor when going around this giant pillar, but I shoved left at the last second—” He mimics the motion with his scuffed crocs on grey concrete. “And it was awesome. I saved us a trip to the hospital, for sure—oh, wait, why are you grabbing the stuff?”

The rough cloth of the backpack’s strap scrapes Dream’s shoulder as he slings it on. “Because we’re leaving.”

“What? Why?”

He nearly stalls at the subdued sound of George’s voice. “Dream—”

“George isn’t feeling well,” he answers sharply. The bluntness is not lost on them; he clears his throat to continue. “It’s getting late, too. We should’ve started to head back anyway.”

He rescues the discarded camera bag from the dusty ground. Empty shells of crushed up cans shift against his spine.

“Is that alright with everyone?” he asks to cut the silence.

Sapnap eyes the backpack and him with candid confusion. “Uh. Yeah, man. That’s fine with me.”

“Great.” He holds the base of the camera to chest and turns to finally, *finally* rest his gaze on George. “And what about you?”

George studies the bag in his hands warily before drifting up to his face. A slight rush filters through him.

“Well?” Dream presses.

The muscles in George’s jaw tighten visibly. “Yeah,” he says. “Fine by me.”

Dream pushes the camera bag into George’s chest as he brushes past. A light exhale of surprise nudges his shoulder at the abrupt motion and becomes a dizzying reminder—foul-tasting beer is still in his blood. He can afford to be reckless.

Sapnap lags behind him briefly to stay at George’s side, Dream hears a one-sided mutter passed in what he assumes is low concern, but it earns no response. The shrapnel of guilt in his chest as they descend the stairs would do more damage if he wasn’t already torn open.

George doesn’t want a fight. Dream is determined to give him less than one.

Under street lamps and crossing on paved roads, they don’t speak for the entirety of the stroll home. Sapnap seems too caught up in avoiding potholes below his wheels and musing aloud to take notice.

It’s dark still by the time they reach his house, the sky a hazy black ebbing into purple. Sapnap parts from them to punch in the code for the garage, following requests from earlier in the night

and putting back the borrowed skateboard.

They're left on the front patio while the automated door rumbles open.

Dream's eyes drift up to study the lamp light spilling from his bedroom window. Two silhouettes sit on either side of the glass, the pointy-eared shape of Patches perched on his windowsill, and a vacant birdhouse mounted near the gutter.

He frowns slightly. He hasn't caught sight of feathers from his mattress view in a while; maybe the added home scared them away.

"Keys?" George interrupts Dream's thoughts.

Dream stares at the back of his hair. "You have them."

"What? No I—" George halts in the process of patting his pockets, and withdraws the lanyard and chain with a small drop in his voice. "Oh."

He's been holding on to them unconsciously since they left the kitchen, and Dream noticed. Between George's comfortability with the metal teeth in his hand, and how he locked the house with practiced ease, Dream never bothered to ask for them back.

Keys jingle together on the chain in an obvious fumble under the faint porch light. Dream's eyes float up high before an impatient breath leaves his lips.

He reaches over George's shoulder to take the lanyard from his grasp.

"They all look the same," George defends as Dream slips the master key into the door.

His wrist turns until the lock clicks. "They don't."

"They do."

Dream's hand lowers, and he waits for George to give the door a push. Pale fingers stretch towards the brass handle, but George hesitates, and his reach is strangely slow. Dream's attention is forced to recognize their sudden change in closeness from before; his chest looming behind George's upper back, warm breaths tumbling onto his small shoulder.

One lean forward or one tilt back apart, they hover in standing silence.

"What, do I need to open it for you, too?" Dream mutters, but it lacks the sharpness he aims for.

George opens the entrance to the warmly lit foyer. "Fuck off."

His restlessness piques, and he presses fingers between George's shoulder blades to guide them both through the doorway. "I thought we weren't fighting."

George turns around at the attempted nudge before either of them can step across the threshold. His weighted glare holds a lucidity that furthers Dream's confusion.

"Save it for when Sapnap's gone." The malice in George's voice dissolves unexpectedly. "Please."

They're too close to start speaking so quietly. Hearing an impassioned plea not an hour after kissing George's lips is distracting, and Dream's drifting eyes are weak to it. He traces over the rigid lines and faded spatter of freckles on George's face. The foyer light washes him in yellow where the street lamps painted him pale.

“Door’s open, George,” Dream murmurs, not taking his eyes away. “Go inside.”

George gazes up at him. “Promise me you’ll keep it between us until tomorrow.”

They hear the garage door begin to roll shut. Their time dwindle in the complicated hearth of the night before they part to sleep, or not sleep, and tiptoe tomorrow until Sapnap’s left them. It’s not fair to crowd his last hours in Florida with their dramatic antics, he knows that much. Sapnap likely has an abundance of other upcoming worries on his mind, and Dream knows that, too.

“I promise,” he relents. After a moment, he lowers a palm to George’s shoulder. “But the second he’s gone, we talk. Deal?”

He sees George’s jaw grow lax at the touch wrapped lightly over the edge of his collarbone. Lips parting in a huff, his face breaks into a momentary vulnerability that causes Dream’s pulse to spike.

In a small voice, George admits, “I really don’t want to fight with you.”

Dream gives his shoulder a firm squeeze. “Too bad.”

George’s eyes fall away and he nods curtly. His fingers lift to gingerly cover Dream’s knuckles. “Okay,” he says. “We’ll fight tomorrow.”

Warmth skitters up veins and tendons on the back of Dream’s hand in a pattern of delicate dynamite, and he slips his hand down George’s bicep until their fingertips are scarcely braided together between them. The gentle touch weakens his already thinning restraint.

“Can’t wait,” Dream jokes dryly. His heart ignites with spastic sparks when George offers him a suppressed, wry smile.

*Shit.*

“Shit.” George glances back at the door with a grimace. “We’re letting all the bugs in. Sorry.”

He moves to step inside and before Dream can convince himself to simply follow, his fingers dart upward to grasp George’s wrist. He stalls him halfway in. The bright gleam of George’s surprised glance back has his heart hammering up to his throat.

“I can’t believe you kissed me,” he blurts. His cheeks grow warm at the immediate stare he earns from George’s eyes. “I’m—I’m going to think about that for the rest of my life, you know. It’s going to live in me.”

George tips his head at him. “Please don’t make this worse.”

“Why not?” His grip loosens and slips from George’s wrist, but his voice is clear. “It’s just more shit to talk about tomorrow.”

He lets go entirely as he narrowly passes by. Humidity from the ajar door battles the cold air conditioner for purchase on his skin. As he expected, George is pulled inside along with him, the heavy entrance shutting behind them with a gentle click.

His pulse jumps when George’s fingers chase his retreating hand, and they sink into his palm with a warning squeeze. “That isn’t smart,” George breathes.

“No,” Dream agrees, “it’s not. But neither is this.” He lifts his hand to drag George’s clasp

pointedly to eye-level, forcing them both to witness the touch. “You’re doing it anyway.”

The door exiting the moth-filled garage shuts loudly in another corner of the house. Their hands float in warm suspension as Dream drops his eyes down George’s face.

“You do this, George.” He exhales heavily. “You keep... *pulling* on me anyway.”

George’s mouth parts in a silent stutter, every soft split on his lips and glint on his teeth studied with deep intent. “I...” A muted breath of composure leaves him, and he confesses, “I can’t help it.”

Dragged back into an unproductive trance before either of them can realize the mistake, Dream chooses to get lost in it. His fingertips near George’s face move to brush his stubbled jaw, and they linger as a consequence of an unchecked urge.

He skims the sharp bone he kissed in the kitchen hours before. George’s dark lashes flutter at the touch, but never wander closed.

He forces himself to lower his hand. The last traces of hot air tumble to their feet.

“Make up your mind,” Dream says, voice falling low. “I’m going to bed.”

—

Dream’s arms sling around Sapnap’s shoulders and squeeze across his back, ribs straining at the unabashed force delivered twice in a row. Busy noise of jet engines and nearby rolling suitcases crowd the humid air. The glass of the airport doors reflects back their silhouettes beneath an overcast sky.

“Let go,” Sapnap forces out through a wheeze.

“When you board,” Dream repeats, muffled into his hair, “when you take off, and when you land. Understood?”

He scoffs lightly and shoves Dream away. “I’m going home, peepaw. Not getting married off.”

“I’m serious,” he threatens. “Or I’ll take back what we talked about with my mom at dinner—”

Sapnap rolls his eyes and lifts his duffel bag from the ground. “Okay, okay. I’ll text you a hundred times, on the hour every hour, until you’re sick of me.” He gives Dream a look. “I promised I’d think about what she said, only if you do, too.”

“The thinking is done, honestly,” Dream admits. “It’s just a matter of figuring out whatever works, or if we should start looking at listings—”

“Wait, really?” Sapnap’s voice lifts. “You’d be down to pick a new place?”

He glances back towards the car where George is leaning against the frame, giving their conversation privacy with a wall of airport noise between them. They didn’t speak come morning, they didn’t speak during the honorary brunch Dream reserved for Sapnap’s last hours here, and they’ve hardly spoken now. After having only kissed just the night before, bombarding George about future plans of living with their mutual best friend seems a *bit* overwhelming.

“Of course I would,” he answers, quieter than before. He drifts back to Sapnap’s bright-eyed smile. “Where is this excitement coming from, anyway? You hate Florida.”

Sapnap shrugs. “I don’t hate you.”

Dream stares at him. Dehydrated in sober consequence from the night before, body sore from endless walking and climbing stairs during dark, he feels a spoil of sadness tighten in his gut.

“Dammit,” he mutters. He pulls Sapnap in by the shoulders again, and the sorrow in him twists. “I don’t know how I’m going to do this without you.”

Sapnap laughs shortly. “You’re gonna blink and forget I was ever here, dude. Don’t sweat it.” He raises a hand and pats Dream’s back. “But if you really, really need me, I’m just one call away.”

They break apart again as Sapnap clears his throat. He’s been ready to leave since they dragged him and his neatly-packed duffle out of Dream’s house hours ago. Sleeves of his pink hoodie bunched up to his elbows at the tempered heat, a bag over his shoulders and headphones around his neck, he seems to linger outside the terminal still for their sake, only.

“Unless I’m sleeping,” Sapnap adds at the brief silence, “then—”

“You’re two calls away, I know, I know,” Dream finishes. The familiar words end with high tension in his throat, and he feels slight pricks push through to his eyes. “Oh my god. This is stupid.”

A grin of disbelief spreads on Sapnap’s face. “Are you *crying*? ”

“I’m not,” he defends poorly. Sapnap lifts his fists to his eyes and mimics the motion, but the display is aimed for George, who’s shoulders jostle in a quiet laugh just in time for Dream to turn and see. “Okay, fuck off.” He gives Sapnap’s shoulder a compassionated nudge. “Get out of here already, Nick. Go home.”

Sapnap gives him a smile and Dream gratefully returns it. He steps away wordlessly when George comes near to take his place in saying goodbye.

Dream watches their exchange from a similar distance, seeing their mouths move and hearing voices pitch, but not catching any solid words. They seem to talk with ease, and his head clouds with uncertainty.

*Promise me it stays between us until he’s gone away.*

Why wouldn’t George want Sapnap to know about the night before? Sapnap, who was the first to know about his feelings in early summer, the one he turns to for help whenever Dream knows he himself can’t be there, who likely holds a bank of their private texts that’ll never see the light of day—why *wouldn’t* George confide in him?

Dream’s eyes drop over George steadily. *Why don’t you want to tell him?* A nervous chord strikes in his chest. *What aren’t you telling me?*

He sees them hesitate when their visible conversation dies, then chuckles as they pull each other into a brief, awkward hug. Tense pats and uncomfortable goodbye’s are exchanged. Sapnap claps a hand over George’s head to give his hair a firm ruffle. George shrugs him off immediately, but his smile is uncomplicated.

A weighted anchor begins to sink in Dream’s chest. He’s given a brief nod to rejoin them again and nudges the dread aside.

“Alright, men,” Sapnap says, readying his bag against his back. He glances between the two. “See

you when I see you.”

Final words casted in the air dissipate before they have time to hook deep. Pink shoulders move through the sparse-dotted crowd, automatic doors glide shut behind them, and he’s gone.

Dream blinks.

Sapnap is gone.

He blinks again and stares at the sliding glass doors, scanning the meandering streams of people inside to try and find his friend’s face again. He expects Sapnap to turn wherever he’s headed on the clean-tiled floor and exit the terminal, laugh it off with a gentle joke, and ride home in Dream’s car like they always have; play music from his stereo, get food, shoot the shit like they’ve gotten so used to.

Yet all he sees is strangers passing by, and the rush of the airport sits in his ears. The air in his lungs leaks to a silent halt.

Someone is gone, again. After two weeks of safety, his net is pulled away with the receding tide, and someone has left him, again. Who’s going to sit behind the wheel when he doesn’t have it in him to drive? Who’s going to finish off his leftovers before tupperware crowds the shelves of his fridge? He can’t sleep in again without someone to feed Patches in the morning, or have a person to bring along for dinners with his family, or go on rollercoasters with his siblings, or sear steak with his mom, or help him talk when he doesn’t have *anyone* else to go to about—

“Hey,” he hears George’s voice interrupt. “Dream. Are you alright?”

Standing at his side, watching his chest shallow and stall where breaths should fall even, George settles a gentle hand on his shoulder. Warm fingers curve over soft fabric, but Dream’s back grows rigid instead of calm.

“Yeah.” He nudges George’s hand away. “I’m fine.”

His fingers fall. “I don’t know, you look kind of—”

“I said I’m fine.” Dream spares a glance at the airport doors and holds back a grimace at his own sharpness. “Can we just get out of here? Please?”

George studies him for a moment, then nods slightly to the car. Dream moves through heavy air to step off the curb, and dark green doors shut away the rest of the world’s sound a comforting few decibels. They sit in silence, a horn sounds faintly behind the car’s bumper, and he rotates the keys in the ignition.

“You know...” George’s voice breaks the quiet. “I’m really going to miss him, too.”

His hand hesitates on the gearshift as the beast thrums beneath his waiting heels. It’s the first shred of honesty he’s heard from George all day, and the urge to drift a hand towards him is halted halfway. He thinks of the rooftop; how George only forced out one truth in his panic after kissing him:

*Sapnap can’t know, he insisted. I can’t have him know.*

Dream’s fingers tighten over the stick, and he slides the car into drive. Too much to say, nothing to say, they fall into even-breathing silence as lanes and lines guide them out of airport congestion. Gaps in green leaves give way to grey sky, washing across the dash and stereo dials until it meets

where Dream's hand lingers still. He hasn't lifted his grasp away; maybe it has to do with George's pale fingers sitting against his thigh in the corner of his vision, maybe the car feels strangely empty with only them in it.

"Why didn't you want Sapnap to know?" he asks finally.

George is silent for long enough to make him glance right. When he does get an answer, George's voice is low. "You really meant it when you said 'the second he's gone.'"

"I can't think about anything else right now, okay?" His eyes fix on the road in avoidance of the jet trails crawling overhead. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"So is that it, then? We're starting this now?"

"Well shit, I—I don't know. Maybe we should." Dream's grip tightens on the wheel, the bumps under his palms push back, and his voice softens. "I think we should."

"...I don't know what you want me to say."

Dream exhales through his nose. "I don't *want* you to say anything."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"Answers," he says in exasperation.

George leans back in his chair. "Obviously I get that, but you know my answers already. I didn't want to tell him because what happened was private. *I'm* private; especially about you. None of that's changed."

"I know, but—" His jaw clenches, molars shifting, considering the words. "I can't shake the feeling I'm missing something." Terse seconds of silence follow, and he demands, "Am I missing something?"

George scoffs immediately. "Like *what*?"

"I don't know! Like—like for some reason, you didn't want him to come to me about it," Dream says. "Or you didn't want him to judge you."

"Judge me," George repeats and he sinks back further into the leather shell of his seat.

Irritation pricks down Dream's spine. "You made half of that promise, too, you know. You'll have to talk to me eventually—"

"It's none of his business," he interrupts. "Why isn't that answer good enough?"

Dream's voice lifts. "Because it's not the *truth*, George. I know you don't tell him the shitty stuff, the stuff that embarrasses you, or—or the stuff you *regret*."

The word is spit out between them into the unmoving air.

His heart pounds in his chest up to his ears, George presses a hand against his temples in Dream's peripheral, and the clear glass of the windshield is suddenly all they have in common. Open road stretches before them under a low-hanging sky, and a droplet splatters in the center of their view. Another hits the hood inches away.

Painfully quiet, he asks, "Do you regret it?"

Sparse water drops collect slowly across the glass. Speckles round the frame of his car, rolling upwards with the accelerating tilt of his speedometer.

“It’s hard to explain how I feel,” George answers softly.

“It shouldn’t be,” he rasps. “It should be a yes, or a no. Do you regret kissing me?”

“Can we please not talk about this until we’re back at the house?”

Dream lets out a strained huff in disbelief. “Why? So you can keep avoiding me again?”

George turns towards him. “It’s not safe to—”

“You told me to wait, I waited,” he bites. “No more excuses, we’re doing this now—”

George’s voice raises. “We can’t have this conversation while you’re *driving!*”

“What conversation?”

Dark greys sit beyond the windshield, pale lights hover over the sunroof.

“George.” Dream’s throat tightens as he repeats, “*What* conversation?”

Midday with red brake lights far before them, his car’s headlights flick into life and their beams hardly scrape the ground. A rising drum of water entombs the frame from overhead as wipers click along on slick glass.

“I’m leaving, Dream,” George says finally. “That conversation.”

A frigid change of air wafts in through the vents to match the accumulating heaviness outside, and the chill creeps over Dream’s forearms. Light hoodie sleeves in the corner of his vision seem to mock his exposed skin as George wraps his jacket tighter around himself in silent defense.

Head pounding, heart racing, Dream forces out, “I—I know you’re leaving. I know that. You think I don’t know that?”

George lifts a hand to the window, pale fingers pressed to raindrops opposite the crystalline sheet. His face is drawn in a tired frown beneath a hazy hue.

“I think you don’t fully understand.”

“Then *tell* me so I will.” Dream’s voice slips slightly. “You can’t keep disappearing whenever this gets hard. Not this time, just—stay with me.”

He barely catches the fleeting motion before it’s masked away, but George flinches at his words; a subtle tick in his face, fall of his hand, followed by a rushed breath urging, “Don’t *say* that.”

“Say… what? Stay?” George glances at him with a tortured emotion he’s never witnessed before, and his voice drops. “Shit, okay, I won’t. I won’t. I promise.”

A weighty silence fills the car as the road stretches on before them. Dream’s eyes lift to the rearview briefly, but Sapnap’s not there to rescue them, either.

“What is it I don’t understand?” he asks again, softer.

“We didn’t talk for two months,” George says slowly. “In a week, I’m going home. What do you

think we're going to be like when all of this is over?"

Dream's brows draw together. "I mean, it's not like you haven't been far from me before. We've done that for the past six years already."

"Yeah, but it's—it's *different* now. You know that."

"Because of last night?"

"Because of everything," George says. "Everything about you, and your life, and your family here that I've seen, that I *know* now, and—and because of last night, too." The admission falls from his lips softly and his voice becomes faint. "The way you were looking at me, Dream... I felt so close to you. My head was quiet, for once."

Dream's eyes turn away from the rain-dark road. In George's face he sees the strain withholding there, lashes squeezed down to the brim of dark circles, jaw taut as though calling on memories of the night before *hurts* him.

"George," Dream says gently, and he watches his head lift.

"What if we've gotten too close?" George whispers. "What if we can't come back from this?"

A fear he's never known by name splits in his chest as George gazes back, his face heavy, eyes darkened with a weathered fight on the brink of giving in. Wind howls against wet glass as neither of them dare to breathe. Foot on the gas, hands on the wheel, Dream's gaze lingers a moment too long.

George's eyes break away and snap forward. "Dream—something's—"

A clipped thud sounds against the frame. He barely catches why—a small flash of movement, a wet shadow glancing off George's side of the glass, trickles of water briefly turning pink—before the downpour washes it away.

The splicing jolt rings in his ears. Water snags and catches underneath the car's rolling tires.

"Fuck." Dream leans forward. "Fuck—what was that?"

"I don't know, it—it was moving too fast," George rushes, "I couldn't tell—"

His heart climbs into his throat. "Was it alive?" He glances between his mirrors frantically, signaling to veer lanes. "Anything, can you see *anything*?"

"The grass is too tall behind us, I can't, I'm sorry." George turns to face forward in his seat again. "Maybe it was just a branch, or—or a—" His breath clips into silence.

"What? What is it?" Dream merges into the outside lane; cars race past his decreasing speed as he's met with steep silence. "Tell me."

"...There's a feather on the glass," he says quietly.

Dream's eyes land on the rapid windshield wipers. Dragged by rain and jammed near the hood of his car, short bristles emerge from the metal. The vane shifts in the rushing wind and crowded white noise doubles in his ears.

"I think you hit a bird," George whispers.

His hands begin to shake. The wheel whips right.

George's chest lurches forward and hits Dream's elbow as it shoots out to brace him. "Jesus —*Dream*, what are you doing?"

Hastily parked and running still, the car jostles at his sudden brake. Dream pulls his forearm back and tears his seatbelt from his body.

"I have to look," he forces out.

His fingers push open the door and it chimes in rhythmic complaint. George's hand grabs his sleeve and yanks him back.

Dream stares at him wildly. "Let go of me—"

A spray of water kicks up the door's exterior as a car speeds past, and George looks upon him carefully before releasing his arm.

"Now you can get out without getting hit," he says. He reaches for the hazard signal and the vehicle's lights begin to blink. "And I'm coming with you."

The pounding of Dream's heart carries him out of the car before he has time to see if George is following behind. Cold droplets of rain sting against his skin, carried by the wind with coarse scents of road oil and gasoline. His shoes hit wet asphalt, his steps drop into muddy green.

Grass and dirt, road runoff and fallen palm leaves; the curbside of the road carries all the wrong traces of life. His eyes pass over swamp ground helplessly as his t-shirt is drenched dark and rain leaks into his scalp. Red lights from his bumper flash and ebb away only to flash again, a silent alarm emitting in the humid downpour.

"I don't see it," Dream shouts. Water bleeds into his shoes as his eyes rake over the grass. "I'm not finding anything, why—why—" His voice breaks. "Why can't I find anything?"

"Maybe it landed back that way more," George calls from nearby. "We pulled over a little far—"

"What if it's in the road?"

"It's not in the road."

"How do you know that? You can't know that."

"It hit the car, then went off to the right—*off* the road," George insists. "I saw it better than you did. We'll find it, Dream. We will."

"What if we *don't*?" he asks hoarsely. "What if it's—what if I—"

"Is that trash, there?" George interrupts suddenly, pointing to a lump in the grass ahead of them, dark and embedded in weeds. "Do you see that? Look. *Look*."

Mud sloshes beneath Dream's heavy steps as he rushes forward, and George hurries behind him. Droplets from the air are breathed shallow into his lungs. Trickles race down his neck.

Sprawled on the soaking, plant-padded ground, a thing of feathers breathes. Unmoving and stunned, its beak rests above a barely shifting chest, and the soil below is stained darker than from rainwater dew.

“It’s... bleeding,” George says.

“It’s alive,” Dream breathes.

His knees press to wet ground as passing cars on the nearby road spit water onto his back. The bird’s eye is half closed, hanging lidded and shining black. Fierce sorrow splits in his chest and heat rushes to squeeze at his temples.

*I didn’t mean to do this to you.*

“What do we do now?” he hears George ask.

*I’m sorry*, he thinks, or whispers, or feels it tighten in his throat and burn the watery brim of his eyes. The bird before him won’t know anything but this wound. *I’m so sorry I hurt you.*

*Please know you’re loved.*

“Dream,” George says softly.

He blinks sharply. “Your jacket. Give me your jacket.” Damp fabric is rapidly handed his way, and he folds the body-warmed hoodie around the bird to carefully scoop it up. “There’s a clinic nearby. I need directions.”

“Okay, my phone is in the car.” George’s voice is firm while they begin to head back towards the abandoned vehicle on the curbside. “You think they’ll take a wild animal?”

Dream cradles the bundle to his chest and shields it from the rain. “I don’t know. It—it’s in shock right now, but the wing, and the blood—we need to at least try. It’s breathing. We have to try.”

“Let me hold it,” George says. Red lights flash against his jaw as they stall near the car’s rear. “You need to focus on getting us there safely, okay?”

The rain pours heavy on their shoulders. He leans down, George’s hands lift, and as the bird is tentatively transferred into his arms, Dream is sure his heart is passed along with it.

—

The drive takes four minutes. Dream has read about birds dying in less than three.

He isn’t sure what spills from his mouth in the blackened stretch of time, questions if the creature is alright, orders for George to cover it, for him to hold it closer, if it’s still breathing, if it’s still bleeding, how long the map instructions say, “*is it breathing, George?*” answered by “*it’s breathing, Dream, in, and out, in, and out, in...*”

George never tells him to slow down, only to keep his eyes on the road. The rain falls loud, they’re drenched when spilling from the car to inside the veterinarian’s office, his shoes track puddles on white linoleum, and the bird is taken from them with passing words he doesn’t listen to. All his head can conjure is how free it must feel to see the swamps and trees of Orlando from high in the air, to dip down in search of safety from the rain, only for freedom to become misery by a reckless car ripping the flight away.

George takes him outside by the clasp of his elbow.

The world is wet; the bench he’s pulled to sit on under the overhang is dry. His knee bounces against the slats of wood. Gutters pour into decorative sidewalk mulch.

“My old cat used to bring home dead ones all the time,” he says breathlessly. His leg bounces and bounces and his hands tighten in a braid of fingers before him. “Always dead. Never breathing. I think she really liked the taste of blood—there’s always blood, so much blood—why do they bleed so much?”

“Dream.”

“And when they’re dead, you just throw them away. You can’t bury them. Things will eat them, tear them open, take a bite of their *heart*—”

“Dream.”

“If it dies, they’ll put it in the trash.” His eyes screw shut. “They’ll wash the blood away and it’ll get forgotten and I’ll have to go back to the airport, George, and you’re going to go home, and I killed it, and it’s dead cause I killed it, and it’ll die cause I—”

“Clay, *listen* to me.” Warm fingers force in between his palms. “Squeeze my hand.”

Dream doesn’t realize his own are trembling until his eyes open to see the grasp. Pale skin slotted next to the sunspots on his knuckles, hands swallowing where George’s disappears—the touch is gentle, familiar, and he doesn’t move in blinded confusion.

“Don’t think about it,” he hears George’s patient voice assure. “Don’t think. It’s okay. Just squeeze.”

Dream squeezes. Pops of knuckles strain in his grasp, but he holds steady to the warm, coursing tether.

The hand in his squeezes back with wordless encouragement. Noise swarming between Dream’s ears slowly settles as he clings, tighter, his head offering up similar memories as they bubble to the surface. Clutching George’s fingers during the log flume ride, silently reaching again behind the driver’s seat on their way home, tangling once more in the morning at their diner booth; holding gently last night on the glittering rooftop. Safety of a different name brings down the swell from his eyes.

“I’m here now. I’m here. Keep holding on as long as you want.”

“She’s going to die,” he says shakily.

George reaches with his free hand to cup Dream’s cheek. He pulls lightly, and Dream collapses into his chest. Muffled heartbeats resound beneath George’s collar, their clasped hands rest on his knee, and Dream breathes into him, his rain-damp shirt, his warmth. His eyes fall heavy and he lets his battered inhales begin to slow.

““She?”” George repeats gently.

Fingers slip into his hair and his eyes screw shut. “The—the feathers on her neck.”

George’s chin lowers against his head. “What did they look like?”

“Dull,” he whispers. “She’s young.”

“What color, Dream?”

“Brown. And dark brown. A bit of blue, maybe.” He exhales. “Maybe.”

The drizzling on the rounded roof above them lightens; he hears the pounding ease to a pattering in their stretching silence. Yellow light spills through beams in the drawn shutter blinds, the inside office a foreign plane compared to their world of sidewalks and wet wind. All he knows is the sound of George's pulse against his ear, the feel of fingernails soothing over his scalp, and how the rain falls strange with his head tilted sideways.

Dream's breathing evens out. A bittersweet warmth floods in his chest at the closeness unfolding between them, their shared hold relaxing on George's thigh but never daring to slip apart. The clasp remains clear.

*It's just us, now.*

Fingertips toy with his hair, drop down, and slowly brush along his jaw in a warm, earnest caress.

*Just us.*

His eyes fall shut at the softness of it; his head tilts up against George's neck.

*Just you.*

A gentle thumb strokes a repeated path from his cheekbone, down to the corner of his mouth, and back up.

*Just me.*

“George,” he whispers.

The touch on his face begins to pull away. “Hm?”

Dream slips a hand from their entangled grasp, and he guides George's palm back to his cheek. His own fingers burn hot in comparison, cradling knuckles and bone, curving skin against skin in chase of the only comfort he knows.

“Please don't stop,” Dream says.

He hears George's heartbeat change. The hand held close to his face doesn't stir for a moment, and a warm breath trickles across the top of his hair. In an unspoken surrender, George's fingers shift down and press where the corner of his jaw meets his neck, lingering on the rhythmic pushback of Dream's pulse. He leans into the returning closeness, face tipping up until the bridge of his nose bumps George's throat.

“She came out of nowhere, you know.” George's voice returns faintly. “That's not your fault.”

Touch brushes under the bone of his jaw, and Dream's words vibrate where pads of fingertips meet sunken skin. “I shouldn't have been driving so fast.”

“You brought her here,” George murmurs. His nails graze the recently shaved patches of Dream's chin, contemplating, before carefully rising over the curve. “You're a good person. I think the whole universe knows you'd never hurt a living thing on purpose.”

He doesn't speak as the forgiving strokes drag from the square shape of his jaw to inches from his lips. It's a reminder that George has kissed them, touched them, dreamed of them placed gently on his skin. He shifts his head in pained regression to what they had the night before.

Centimeters from the skin of George's throat, he whispers, “Can we talk about something else?”

“What—what do you want to talk about?”

“Anything,” he says. “Distract me.”

“Distract you,” George echoes, and he hums. “Okay, well... did you know that it was going to rain today?” The question is met with silence. “Me neither. Sapnap did make me check the forecast, like, ten times to see about his flight, but it said there was only a thirty-percent chance it would.”

Dream’s head drifts briefly to the airport, wet tarmac, taxied planes under dripping clouds. The silent realization of Sapnap’s week-long worry over the weather falls into place seamlessly, and something in him lifts.

“One hundred percent chance it will,” Dream finds himself saying, “but it only covers thirty-percent of the area.”

George’s fingers stall on his cheek. “What did you just say?”

“That’s... what that means, the ‘chance.’” He nudges George’s neck with his nose in blunt encouragement for him to continue. “It’s always raining somewhere. I guess we’re in the thirty-percent.” Abrupt silence follows, and Dream’s lips press together. “Did you really not know that?”

“No,” George says vehemently. “I thought the weather people were guessing this entire time, or—” His hand slips back to trace the faint lines of a smile as they rise across Dream’s face. “Or consistently poor at their jobs.”

“You are a grown man,” he says and earns a light flick to his teeth.

“When was I meant to have learned this? When did *you* learn this?”

“I didn’t learn it, it’s obvious.”

George huffs and covers his mouth with a palm. “Stop lying. You probably came across it on one of your ‘fun-facts to use in conversation’ deep dives, or something—”

“What the hell?” he muffles and George’s hand moves away. “I don’t do ‘*deep dives*.’”

“Yes, you do. You’re the biggest loser I know.”

He scoffs. “Okay. Here’s a fun fact for you, then: you’re an idiot.”

George’s short laughter jostles against his cheekbone. “Oh really? You wanna hear the fact that I know?”

His head lifts off of George’s chest and he meets his eyes unguarded. The warmth on his face softens at the sight; it’s hard to believe he lived so long only seeing him through a screen, digital pixels of the spots on his cheeks, the light scar near his temple, the sharp peak in his hairline. Mesmerizing details slot into Dream’s heart with determined remembrance. Shared contact, shared closeness, he knows he’s not the only one falling short of reasons to look away.

“What is it?” Dream voices quietly, and he watches the hesitation slip down George’s features with his descending gaze.

“I...” George’s brows pinch together slowly. “I’m going to miss this so much.”

His heart plummets without warning.

“Sorry,” George says in a hush. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—I don’t know why I said that—”

“Why...” Dream lowers his forehead down to rest against the warm skin above George’s brows, closing the gap with gentle contact. Hot air rebounds on George’s jaw as he whispers, “Why are you always somewhere else? Why can’t you just be *here*?”

A breath spills across his face, combative against the hovering humid air. If he were to lean towards its genesis, he could capture George’s lips and let the temptation run through their dwindling inhibition, no mention of their fight, the clinic, the bird or the rain. Desperation stirs in his chest until George’s voice returns.

“Maybe I don’t know how.”

“You know how.” Dream tips his nose to brush the bridge of George’s own, voice falling softly. “You’re the one who kissed me first, George. That has to count for something.”

“What if it just means I wasn’t thinking?” George asks in a mutter.

Hands held absently on the dip between their pressed knees, he swipes a palliative thumb across the back of George’s knuckles. “Are you thinking now?”

“Yes.”

“About how you have to leave?”

His voice falters. “Yes.”

A heavy exhale leaves Dream’s lips with the staggered fall of his shoulders. He sifts through the sorrow festering in the corners of their memories already and gives George’s hand a squeeze.

“Does this always feel like that to you?” he asks. “You’re never happy, it’s always... one more thing to miss when all of this is over?”

George pulls back from their pressed contact to meet Dream’s wandering, exhausted eyes again. “That’s not it at all. I promise you, this trip has meant everything to me so far.”

*Everything.*

The word returns, and echoes, and he searches George’s face candidly.

“You promise?”

“I promise,” George says.

Wind shifts in the dark brown strands of his hair and trickles across the back of Dream’s neck. Seeping into still damp t-shirts and diminishing their warmth, his eyes rise with the need to replace it.

“Then prove it,” he murmurs.

George’s eyes widen. “You can’t be serious.” His gaze drops down briefly. “Are—are you serious?”

“What if I am?”

He begins to lean away. “Then you’re ridiculous. Now, Dream? Now? Why would I—what did

you—did you listen at all to what I said in the car?”

Dream’s eyes pass over him in slow consideration, and his wordlessness is taken for spite.

“You didn’t,” George concludes. “You didn’t listen. Okay. Yesterday isn’t going to happen again, okay? I’m sorry, Dream. I’m sorry. I know I messed up and it’s making this harder than it was already, but—but it’s only going to hurt us *more* if we keep pretending this will last.” His words trip in between increasingly frantic breaths. “Because it’s not going to last, it can’t last. In seven days I’m gone again and everything goes back, you’re a ghost and I’m not here and none of this will matter, almost like—like none of it *ever*—”

George’s voice is smothered by a firm press of lips as Dream kisses the frantic words from him. Everything threatens to cave under the cautious reconnection as he tests George gently, mouth moving slowly, jaw shifting forward until an exhale of abandon slips from George’s nose. Last traces of hesitation melt away as dry lips and hushed breath give back without resistance.

His fingers reach for George’s jaw, fingertips respond on the side of his cheek; shaky and disbelieving in the face of recklessness. George’s hand begins to pull him closer in a familiar tug of longing, and Dream’s will splits down the middle. Temptation rots; to feel George’s lips part against his own, to taste and pursue, change the course of an unexpected kiss and never come back—but he sharply drops his mouth away.

Hot breath hits his nose. His own exhales pant faintly against George’s chin.

Dream’s lips hum and his hands strain at how much it makes sense, feels true, feels *right*. His heart hammers up to his throat and he doesn’t dare open his eyes. Sinews of excuses strung in the air connecting the static of his head to George’s discursive fears are knocked away, simply, by a kiss and beats of quiet following after it.

Nothing is thought; nothing is spoken. All he hears is rain.

He leans forward and softly captures George’s lips again. A pastel flush floods between noses nudging cheeks, trembling hands cupping once more, and George’s palms float down to his chest.

*Please*, his panic flares between his ears. *Don’t, don’t, don’t*—

With flattening fingers and a moment’s hesitation, Dream is pushed away.

The cauterized tear forces his eyes to fly open, letting in low-misted light hanging overhead, but George isn’t looking at him. His breath is weak and his face is pained.

“How...” George’s words nearly get lost in the air between them, and he croaks, “How could you?”

Dream’s throat grows tight. The damage done has loosened his jaw already, and his filter escapes him. “I needed to.”

Hands placed on his chest curl against his shirt, George’s fingernails and knuckles digging into skin with enough force in his balled up fists to pull Dream in. “You shouldn’t have. You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You did it first,” he whispers.

“Not the same.” George’s voice cracks as his head hangs down. “Not the s—”

A bell splits the sound from their far left. The chime rings, Dream hears the door to the veterinarian's clinic push open, and his eyes squeeze shut. Dread rises in his boiling blood and hammers in his skull.

Footsteps clack on concrete ground. Windshield wipers slide unending back and forth in his mind. He sees the flash behind his eyelids again, the terrible thud that followed, the indifferent rain still drizzling half a heartbreak later.

The heat of George's body next to him vanishes when he rises off the bench. Between the honey-kissed hum against his teeth and the remorse clawing up his tongue, Dream knows his body won't let him stand even if he tries.

"George, is that correct?" someone says.

"Y—yes." George clears the waver from his throat. "That's me."

"I'm glad to see you two are still here," she continues, and Dream recognizes her voice from earlier; the auburn-haired woman at the counter who looked him in the eye. "I've just been given news by one of our staff about the bird you brought in. She was suffering from trauma to her wing and chest from the collision, but they were able to stop the source of bleeding."

Dream's eyes open.

"Oh my god," George says. "Are you—you're saying she's okay?"

His head lifts up in time to see the doctor nod, lips pressed together peacefully. "She's in recovery now as we speak, but with enough time and proper care, she'll heal just fine. No need to worry." A breath of candid relief flees them both. "You and your partner can go home."

Dream's heart drops steeply into his stomach. His gaze cuts left, slipping over George's sharp profile and parted lips in looming dread of the correction coming from them.

"What's going to happen to her?" George asks.

His voice is undisturbed. Dream's pulse flees him to unseen heights.

"As far as these things go, we've done all we can until a team relocates her to a rehabilitation center in the area." She pulls her clipboard away from the green of her sweater, and a small card is extended George's way. "I made a call the moment you two came in the door, so it's likely she'll be taken there tonight."

"Will she fly again?" Dream lets out suddenly, and her eyes jump towards him. "When—when she's better, will they set her free?"

"That depends on her condition after treatment," the doctor explains, and her voice softens. "If you're interested, you can call the office who'll be handling her case. They get birds like her all the time."

George passes the card to him without question. Sharp edges and subtle glances press into his heart.

"Thank you," Dream says quietly.

"Really," George agrees.

She shakes her head. “You saved her from a lot of pain. We should be thanking you.”

George is handed a plastic bag with his stained hoodie inside as passing words arise between them. Dream finally gets to his feet, and his head is tossed into cluttered thoughts of the laundry room, detergent, scrubbing fabric incessantly and washing brown-tinted water down the sink. George doesn’t like blood, he knows; he’ll have to clean up his own mistake. Brown birds and George’s lips and Sapnap’s disappearing silhouette build a headache behind his downcast eyes.

The bottom of his shoe drops off the curb and smacks the glistening asphalt. The woman’s voice calls shortly from behind them.

“Boys.”

They turn to see her lingering under the overhang still, clipboard clasped in her arms at the breeze whistling through. She finds Dream’s gaze again and holds it firm.

“Not many people would pull over,” she says. “I hope you both rest easy today, knowing you’ve done the right thing.”

Light drops of rain grace his shoulders. Dream watches her go and as the office door glides shut, growing hope for the bird’s life rekindles a fight in his chest; the shift sits in him, crawls in him, festering on their way back through the rainy lot to his car. His gut lurches when sitting behind the wheel again, but one glance at George in the passenger seat eases the feeling away.

*The right thing*, he thinks.

The drive home is silent. His hands and mouth feel cold again.

*Do I know what that is, anymore?*

He parks in the driveway and knows George watching him as he reaches for the keys. The hum of the car is killed and so goes their only barrier from stifling quiet, the house looming before his rainspotted windshield.

Dream’s hands stay wrapped on either side of the steering wheel. The silence is sickening and bites down his skin.

“Never do that again,” George says finally.

He stares blankly at the garage door ahead. “Are you asking me to make another promise?”

George’s head swings his way. “*Do I need to?*”

“That depends.” Dream’s eyes drift to the side. “Is this another boundary you actually want me to break?”

He doesn’t have it in him to wince at the freeness of his tongue, passing it over the back of his molars to keep his jaw from clamping shut as the dark of George’s eyes bores back. His words are greeted with a flicker of danger, a twitch of muscle against jawbone, and nothing more.

George grabs the bagged hoodie at his feet and elbows his way out of the car. Chimes emit from the passenger’s side, and Dream’s hands slip off the wheel before his seatbelt whirs in unbuckled retreat.

“George.” The frame shudders at the slam of their doors and his eyes rapidly track George’s

movement around the hood. “*George.*”

George’s steps continue away from the driveway’s edge before his voice can take hold. He carries behind him, and the front entrance has been pushed open by the time he reaches it; a wide greeting with tall ceilings, empty halls, extra space without Sapnap’s presence to fill it.

The door shuts behind them, and George moves deeper into the hall with indifference. Dark floors hold his trailing shadows; they’ve wandered into a dim home, overcast light poorly scraping high corners, air conditioning cold enough to convince him a screened-in breeze swept through.

Dream kicks off his shoes and hunts after George in tired pursuit, down the hall, past the dining room, finally ending in the kitchen.

He’s at the sink already with rushing water filling up the basin. Late-afternoon looks chilling on the unreadable palette of his back, and the sight could be a mimicry of what Dream himself had looked like in soft moonlight nights ago, standing before the glassy window, sweat of a nightmare drenched down his spine.

He catches a guilted glimpse of the splotches in the center of George’s jacket before it’s lowered below the faucet stream. The plastic encasing sits abandoned on the counter, he’s about to offer up the laundry room instead, but his chagrin is short lived.

“Either help,” George mutters, sensing him over his shoulder, “or don’t hover.”

Dream empties his pockets onto the island, metal keys and a heavy wallet hitting the marbled stone, but George doesn’t move at the sound. “You’re avoiding me already.”

The water shuts off with a squeak. “It’s too confusing to talk.” George’s hands disappear to shove down the soaking hoodie. “Every time we try, one of us gets hurt.”

“I couldn’t just sit there and listen to you convince yourself all of this is meaningless,” he rasps. “I had to stop you somehow.”

George turns away from the sink to face him, opposite the end of the stretching island and expression colder than speckled stone. “By kissing me the way you did? What made you think I would *ever* be okay with that?”

“You said it was a good idea that you didn’t kiss me,” he dares to recount, “then you did it anyway. You said it made your head quiet, for once, then told me all the reasons we should give up *anyway*.” He steps around the island’s corner, knuckles pressing down onto the surface. “‘Not the same,’ George? Is it really not the same?”

George meets the other side of the island as their half-room of distance decreases. “I already told you, I wasn’t thinking.”

Dream scoffs. “Right.”

A split of emotion crosses George’s face, and he drinks it in with avarice. “What, you don’t believe me?”

Heat rushes to his face, but the incessant clawing in his chest and fluttered nerves on his throat refuse to set him free. “You weren’t thinking,” he echoes, moving closer with a hand on the edge of stone as George stays rooted to the spot. “That’s why you kissed me back?”

“Yes,” George says sharply.

A caustic grin takes over his face, and he questions, “*Twice?*”

George’s lips part. Cold lights in the low ceiling overhead loom closer with each shift of his silent breath. The glint Dream felt he’d caught during their spat at the grocery store a week ago has resettled in George’s eyes, defiant against all odds, taking up more space than the frame of his shoulders dares to. The rooftop last night, the foyer hours after, the bench at the clinic—he’d continue this fight with George forever if it meant he could infuse him with this red-hot fury, and breathe the heat from his lips.

“Or was it three times?” Dream continues. “More than that?”

George’s voice grazes past his teeth. “Shut up.”

“Look at where we are, George. What’d you call it? ‘This stupid kitchen?’” He stands close, gaze hovering down, not leaning too far in and not daring to touch. “Last night, I had you on this counter *pulling* on me because you *wanted* something—” A short breath escapes George’s throat and he turns his jaw away, but the visible burn on his cheeks entices Dream further. “And I didn’t kiss you, because I knew. Whatever you wanted, I’d be there, and I knew that *wasn’t* what you wanted.”

“Did you forget about all that today?” George asks, deathly quiet.

“Of course not.” Dream stares, eyes following as George shakes his head and brushes past him towards the sink.

“I thought you’d continue to be where I was in this.” George’s hands return to the soaking hoodie with his back turned away, and the sudden distance in his voice forces Dream’s pulse to rise. “I guess we were both wrong.”

“*I am* where you are,” Dream insists, stepping forward. His eyes fall to the brown-tinted water where George’s fingers squeeze drenched fabric restlessly. “I am, and I will be. I meant that. But after today I don’t think *you* know where that is.”

George’s eyes lift in a wordless recoil. “Excuse me?”

Dream’s heart pounds. “You said you weren’t thinking the first time? Fine, I’ll take that. But have you thought about why?” His forearm crosses over the sink to block George’s hands, forcing them to withdraw. “Maybe you finally did something you wanted, *without* trying to stop yourself. That’s new, isn’t it? That scares you.”

“You’re not in my head,” George breathes. “You’re not me.”

“I’m not you,” he agrees. “But I *know* you. All this talk of leaving—” He steps forward; George’s back bumps the counter. “You’re scared. Scared of what could happen before and after you go, and scared now that Sapnap’s gone, too.”

Animal eyes claw over him rapidly. “You—you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

An exasperated exhale leaves Dream’s chest. “*I do.* I do know, because I’m scared, too.”

Eyelashes flick up in a subtle flutter on George’s face. A twinge strikes in Dream’s heart and he lets his gaze slip down. In their decrease of distance and close-shifting shoulders, each pass of breath is delivered in sudden realization they’ll have no interruption, no footsteps in the hall, no sudden break of grace.

"I know you were on your own for a long time, and it hurt you." Dream's voice grows quieter as he continues, "I hurt you. None of that was your fault. But you don't have to be alone anymore."

George relaxes against the counter's edge, letting the closeness grow. Dream dares to settle a hand on his waist, and the body-warm clothes under his open palm tense before the muscles slowly ease into his presence. George breathes out and the air hits his chest.

His fingers curl into George's side as his voice fractures. "Can't you see what you're doing to yourself, too?"

As though the audible break snaps him from a dream, George's eyes leap up to him. Traces of warmth in his face dissipate into rigidity and Dream's stomach flips.

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought you did." George nudges his touch away. "I'm sorry."

Dream lets himself be left behind as the warm body in front of him slips from the sink. His head is flooded with the familiar, skull-crowding pain of an ache only George can put there.

"After everything—" His voice splits as he turns to follow George's back. "That's what you're going with?"

Thresholds give way to the living room, wood turning to carpet as George moves with determination to keep space between them.

Ripe with anger, Dream continues, "You think I don't *know* you?"

George's socks hit the carpet, and he turns. "So what if you don't?"

Dream looms over him at the abrupt stop, his chest rising and falling in shadowed rhythm. Closeness becomes of them again for a hot-breathed moment, almost obtainable, almost fracturing the calculated guard that covers George's face from the pinch of his brows to the set of his jaw. He could strike matches on the darkened line of George's scruff and swallow the burning whole. He would taste ash, too, if George wasn't looking at him like he could be a stranger.

"You know what?" Dream shakes his head, hands falling to pat his pockets and coming up empty. "Christ, where—" He moves rapidly back to the bulk of his wallet abandoned on the counter, and he tugs it open with trembling fingers.

He hears the recognition strike in George's voice as his thumbs pass over folded papers. "Clay, don't, you don't have to—"

"No, no, I do. *Here.*" He finds the paper with blue ink that has lingered in his brain since its creation, and he tosses it forward for George to catch. "Here's your fucking list. Read that and tell me I'm wrong. Tell me I don't know who it is I've spent the best years of my life caring about, more than I've cared about *anything.*"

George clasps the paper between his knuckles and stares, eyes leaping from the folded list and back to his face.

"Read it," Dream snaps.

George's eyes drop again and he gingerly unfolds it. The edges of the paper shake in his hands, and he clears his throat.

“Puzzles,” he reads tentatively. “Blue, rain, cinnamon cereal, malachite… chess set, mint… tea… Dream, what—” His eyes fall down the page rapidly, scanning the lines as a tremor rises in his voice. “What is this?”

He knows what he’s gazing at, what the blue ink flooding the page in organized scribbles, bleeding side margins, doodles and notes and scraps of words looks like. George continues to read in rapid descent, his face pale and lips parting. The cluttered hum in Dream’s brain slowly eases back to somewhere sound in the stretching moment. Combined carelessness and buzzing nerves keep him stoically silent.

George slowly sits on the edge of the couch’s sectional, paper in hand, elbows lowered to his knees for support. “Explain,” he says. “Please.”

“We weren’t talking,” Dream mutters. “I couldn’t focus. I couldn’t sleep. I knew I had to at least try to get better, and start to work on myself, but… all I could think about was you.”

His eyes drift up to avoid watching George pour continuously over the page, and he exhales from deep in his ribs.

“After those fights we had, I felt like I didn’t know you at all anymore,” he continues slowly. “And I hated that feeling. I *hated* it. I kept constantly trying to remind myself that I knew you—*really* knew you.” His brows pinch together. “I told my therapist that, and he… gave me a piece of paper and told me to write it all down. To get it out my head. So… I made a list.”

His hand still feels the phantom plastic of the first pen he’d been given on Dr. Lauren’s couch, the scratchy paper crisp and blank, unsure of where to begin. He started with the George he thought he knew, the one no one else saw or understood, compiling six years worth of memories that weave in and out of the cracks of his own life. Held in George’s hands in present is where the list ended, a complex profile of a person constructed with unfiltered adoration and attention.

“And then I kept it.” His voice wanders faintly. “And just… added on whenever I thought of something new, or started missing you again.”

George doesn’t speak. The thin, folded page is enough to frighten Dream’s own heart if he considers it too long, and his jaw tightens at the blank silence. He wouldn’t know what to say in the face of such obsession either, but a strange weight in him feels lifted with yet another secret freed from his heavy chest.

“You remembered everything,” George says finally.

Dream’s eyes float back to him with caution and find he’s no longer fixed down at the list, but staring up openly, dark lashes flicked up wide and cheeks tinted with color. The attention makes his skin crawl as he can’t decipher if the dropping, slow glances are made of pain or progress. Their eyes fall back to the paper held gingerly yet with persistence in George’s hands, and Dream attempts to dislodge the lump building in his throat.

“There’s your proof, George,” he says. “I’m not going to pretend I don’t know you to make this easier for either of us.” His voice, low and unyielding, begins to rise. “I’m not going to sit here and be *miserable* for the rest of the week, pretending I don’t have feelings for you, because I do.”

A flighty rush escapes him at the liberating release of the words, breath picking up in a pattern of wingbeats from the cage in his chest.

“God, I do,” Dream repeats in relief. “And *you*—you keep pulling on me, and reaching for me.

Even though you know you're leaving, part of you wants to let this happen." His knee lowers to the carpet in racing momentum, and he meets George at eye level. "I know it. I *felt* it. You kissed me with so much in you."

The stern edge of George's shoulders relax, and the tip of his brows softens his face all the same. He takes George's hands in his own and tangles their fingers together, locking tight.

"So go ahead and push me," he breathes. "Push me all you want, George. I'm not going anywhere."

The rise and fall of his short exhales blankets the resounding silence. George's hand trembles, slips from their shared hold, and light fingertips touch to Dream's jaw.

"For now," George whispers.

"Yeah." Dream tilts his head into the tentative touch. "For now." The paper list crinkles somewhere between brushing fingers and shifting palms, and George's expression crumbles further. "What if we can be happy here, even if this only lasts for a little while?"

"It's not going to change anything," George says in a clipped breath.

"It's going to hurt us either way," he counters gently, and his hand is clamped down upon with unwavering force as George's eyes shut.

"You're too important to lose," is all George offers back.

Warmth blooms in Dream's chest at the soft words. Determined flame tails of a firebird spread down inside his core, and he lifts George's hand and presses a kiss of searing relief to his knuckles.

Against George's fingers, he mumbles, "Then don't lose me."

He rests his lips briefly to the turned interior of his wrist and relishes in the quiet catch of breath he hears. Skin brushing skin and heart coursing loud, he lowers their hands down to gaze at George's face. A thawing struggle slips slowly from his features.

*Give in*, Dream wills, pinching fingertips and feeling them pinch back. *Give in to me*.

"H—how?" George says.

With rising hope hot on his tongue, he breathes, "All you have to do is trust me."

"I do trust you."

Dream leans back and slowly rises off the ground. Linked by a firm clasp of hands, he pulls George from the couch with him. "You don't."

"I do," George repeats, fingers wrapped tight on Dream's forearms for balance.

He steps back into the living room, a softened smile lifting on his face. "Say it again."

George's eyes drop to his teeth as he's pulled forward. "I do."

"You trust me?" he pushes.

"I—" George's voice wavers. "I trust you."

Dream slows as they reach the heart of the wide-walled space, lamp lights yellow on the edges of

George's hair. They share a gaze imbued with building warmth and fading sun, the empty house encased around them feeling closer now with the surety they're the only ones in it.

"I'll believe it when you mean it," Dream murmurs. "So trust me, George."

A glistening sheen wells at the base of George's eyes. His heart is torn and sewn again at the unforgettable sight.

"Trust me," he says one final time, voice falling softly. "That's all we need to make this work."

George's hands slide over his shoulders and pull their chests flush together, knocking a breath from Dream's pattering ribs. Warmth squeezes from his thighs to his abdomen to his collar, his eyes screw shut, and his hands move to clutch George's back without reserve. The force of the embrace tips them, he leans to counterbalance it, and George clings in an affirmation tighter than either of them dared to have at the airport, the kitchen, the bench in the rain. His hands sprawl on George's spine and get lost in the steady thump of a heartbeat pressed against his own.

A faint, hitching breath jostles George's frame. Dream feels dampness bloom on his t-shirt seconds after.

"Oh," he breathes, holding tighter as George begins to sag in his arms. "Okay, hey. Hey, it's okay."

"I'm sorry," George forces out against his shirt, words chopped by his battered breath. "I'm so *—sorry*. I didn't mean for it—it to get so—"

His fingers slide to cup the back of George's head as a fierce wave swells in his chest. "Easy, easy, I have you. You're alright."

"I didn't wanna hurt you, or—or give you more to worry about, had so much already, then the trip came so soon, too soon, and—" Dream's hands gently ease him away by the warm curve of his shoulders as the spill of words continues. "I couldn't say anything, you wanted me to, I couldn't—I thought I'd know—I still don't know—I don't—I don't—"

He lifts his hands to cup George's jaw in holding comfort. "It's *okay*," he says firmly, gaze dropping to study his face. The sight makes his tear-stained chest tighten; red on George's skin, water in his eyes, one breath or sharp sniffle away from shattering altogether.

"It's not." George's voice is thick, labored with strain as he repeats, "I'm so sorry, Dream. I'm so sorry."

"George, what..." His eyes pass over his face with intense concern, thumb brushing away a salt-water track on his cheek. "What are you talking about?"

George wraps trembling fingers over Dream's wrists, locking his touch in place on the edge of his jaw. His eyes don't stray, and fear returns to crowding Dream's head as he stares into the darkness, lashes cluttered with thin drops, brimming and breaking before him.

"I applied for a visa," George whispers.

Air leaks from his lungs in a silent standstill. George's hands on his wrists cling tight, tighter, tightening, blood coursing under skin. George's cheekbones are warm in his hands. The words don't register.

"You... what?"

A staggered breath escapes George's lips, and he leans forward to collide his head with Dream's chest again. "I felt like—like I couldn't tell you unless I knew," he explains. Tears slip down and pass over Dream's fingers. "Couldn't get your hopes up if it wasn't real. Didn't want to—to *crush* you, if it wasn't real. If I knew, we wouldn't be stuck anymore, we wouldn't be but—but I still don't know. I still don't."

Dream's eyes are fixed to the far view of the half-walled kitchen, the counter and the lights, the fuzzy paint on the living room's supporting beams. The images burn into his retina and he can hardly comprehend anything beyond them.

Synapses in his wayward brain begin to fire, reconnect, realign at the word: *visa*. His thoughts collide and bend to morph around the concept, *George, visa, future*. Every scattered piece he thought he collected in observation of George descends in a flitting race of reconsidered memories. All of George's anger and all of his resistance falls away as the rest of their recent months shift into place.

"Please say something," George voices weakly from his chest. Dream's palms are unmoving against his jaw until a harsh cry breaks through. "Please."

"When," he breathes finally and feels George's breath of relief hit his ribs, "when did you... even... start *thinking* about applying?"

They'd talked in hypotheticals for years, but the only shred of real consideration was for this visit, this September—and even then with only a promise of two weeks, everything between them changed. Too caught up in his present healing, Dream feels the outside world past their week in his cozied home split open at the seams.

"I don't know." George sniffs to free his voice as Dream's dazed hands float back to brace his shoulders again. "Over the summer."

His brows fall sharply in confusion. They weren't talking during summer; two months of silence, besides the estranged call off-stream that'd left them both feeling empty, and now his visit in Florida. Before all of their forced emptiness came the closeness and collision under the early weather of heat waves, when Dream's head was far too preoccupied to consider a possibility so far away and life-shifting.

*Visa*. His head sifts through the immediate ties that rise to the surface; *to stay with me, to live with me, a life with me, a life here, a life partner*.

A blunt drop collapses from Dream's sternum to his stomach, and he is gutted, and the realization grows dizzily in the corners of his vision.

"When in the summer?" he asks in a rasp.

"Dream," George warns, as though what's being asked of him is tangible in the decreasing air.

His hands squeeze over the curve of George's shoulders in a desperate, gripping plea. "When, George?" His voice begins to shake. "Please. *Please*. Tell me when."

George leans away from his chest again, gaze drifting up slowly, and Dream can hardly meet his eyes.

"I decided to start the process after talking about it with my family," George says softly. "With my grandparents, Clay. Back in the middle of June."

## Chapter End Notes

I can't express how glad I am to have completed this chapter, it was a lot of fun to finally execute the ideas that've been mulling around in my brain for so long. it's extremely satisfying to begin to tie up loose ends and finally give insight to george's character, we shall all miss sapnap dearly. excited to see what you all think!

I wanna keep this note short but also want to say thank you all for the comments, fanart, support and love - you can't imagine how much it means to me to see my work inspire the creativity of others. happy birthday to lana, hope this chapter is a nice present lol, thank you endlessly to zach for helping my writing come to fruition and everyone else who kept the spoilers a secret. feels like the story is going to change from here on out, excited to continue, see you all soon and hope you enjoyed <3

# Maybe

## Chapter Summary

In an unveiling of secrets both old and new, Dream and George slip into their first day alone.

## Chapter Notes

Hi! I didn't mean for this upload to be this long, but here we go.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Threads of blues and greys swirl on the rug beneath Dream's legs. From the end of his socks to where George's chest-drawn knees begin, cat hair blankets carpet, and pillows stolen from the couches for cushioning dot the floor. He breathes out; the footrest to the lounge chair behind him digs into his back.

"Explain it," Dream says, eyes tracing his drained face from feet away. "One more time."

George swallows and wipes his rosied nose with a tissue rescued from the coffee table. Sides of the cardboard held in his lap have ducks and flowers dotting down the edges; Dream isn't sure when he'd handed him the box, sometime after they'd stopped standing together, stopped holding each other, sank to the floor instead of the couches and began to talk. All he really remembers is hearing the strained confession of "*June, June, June*," and pulling George in tighter until any traces of hiccuped breaths were subdued for good.

"Okay," George mutters. He clears the sound of muddied tar from his throat. "So, you and I had just finished getting tickets for this trip. My whole time on holiday I was... excited, and when my mum saw that, she and my grandparents convinced me to try for a visa." He sniffs. "Wanted to talk to you about it before I applied, but by the time I got back—you know."

Dream's jaw tightens. Static between them lingers too unsettled to air out his guilt, and he urges it down with a silent nod for George to continue.

"I wasn't sure if I should still apply for a while, but—" George's voice strains where ebbing tears had interrupted him the first go around. "But I missed you. I knew the process would take a long time, too, and there'd be a lot of steps involved, so I figured I'd start anyway. You seemed so busy working all on your own, I felt helpless without something to focus on. I don't know."

Dream's features slip into softness, and his fingertips twitch with the urge to move across the rug and gently take George's hand. Silence continues in their shared immobility.

"So," Dream assists, "you applied anyway."

George exhales shakily. “Yeah. I did. I thought it’d be accepted by the time I got here, and I’ve been calling home every day, but the embassy hasn’t sent us anything.”

“Why didn’t you want me to know?”

He didn’t have it in him to ask questions the first time George talked through the process, listening carefully instead to dates, deadlines, hard to swallow confessions and lengthy pauses where they both had to recollect their spilling thoughts. The fragility of George’s features and shock resounding in his own head had kept his interrogation at bay, and his words land unexpectedly.

George’s tone changes. “I already told you why.”

“It was a little hard to understand you before,” Dream says carefully, and a blunt beat of silence follows. “Please, George.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.” George wrings his hands together in his lap, eyes busied with the tightening grip. “The main reason I didn’t mention it to you, Dream, was because things were so fragile with us already. We weren’t talking, nothing made sense, and if I told you too soon just for it to get denied two months later, I...”

George lets his words trail as his brow pinches together sharply. Inklings of surprise trickle in Dream’s head at the surreality of witnessing his unfiltered emotion, saturating the glassy sheen of his eyes, the slight puffiness to his cheeks, and reddened skin under sticky tracks of dried tears. The sight topples his piling concerns.

*You’re used to this*, he thinks, and he forces a harsh swallow down his throat. *Crying because of me.*

A slight tremor forms in the press of George’s lips, and his heart climbs high in his ears. He knows he won’t be able to think if George tears up again.

“I couldn’t do it,” George whispers finally. “I couldn’t break your heart twice.”

Dust mingles with the stagnant air as a restricted breath escapes him. The cavern of his chest tightens in a growing ache, enclosing around thoughts of protection and being protected; a wounded bird cradled in George’s hands. Something stained lingers in the half-full sink.

He can’t bring himself to care for it when George’s eyes distract him, lift towards him in the shallow silence, a dark stare pained with unwavering intent. Candor looks beautiful on him. Speechless and loving, Dream gazes back.

*“This isn’t a no,”* the strong, familiar hearth in him resounds, *“it’s a ‘not yet.’”*

He clears his throat. “And... and Nick,” he says dumbly, “I mean—does he—”

“He doesn’t know,” George answers. “Clearly he would’ve told you right away. Asked too many questions. I couldn’t risk that happening.”

“...So you carried it all on your own?” he breathes.

George tips his head. “I had to.”

Empty leagues of carpet sway against George’s stoicism, and his chest tips forward in disbelief. His knees lower down, socks dragging the distance, and he casts with force, “You *don’t*.”

George leans back against the dark sectional, wide blinking eyes taking hold of his face. “Are...” His voice trails. “You’re okay with all of this?”

“Of course I am.” Confusion churns in Dream’s chest, and his skin warms under the careful scrutiny of George’s gaze. “George, of *course* I’m okay with this. What—what makes you think I wouldn’t be?”

“Sorry,” George breathes out, lowering his forehead into a supporting palm. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Pale fingers press to his temples in a half-cover over his eyes, and Dream’s chest tightens further without sight of his face. The slope of his shoulders and sigh leaking from them offers only visible shame, threaded embarrassment he’s seen before, and realization sinks again.

*You’re used to believing I don’t want you.*

“Is that another reason why you didn’t tell me?”

George’s hand slowly drops down. “What do you mean?”

“Earlier, you said ‘the main reason,’” Dream points out cautiously, and he searches his face. “Did you really think I wouldn’t want this? For you to *live* with me?”

“Dream.” An exhale blows from George’s nose, and muscles on the edge of his jaw shift before he continues to speak. “I... I’ve seen you fall in and out of crushes before, okay? Out of relationships, before. I know how big your heart can be, and I know how you burn out—I don’t mean that in a bad way, really, I’m not trying to—” He cuts himself off and a swallow is pressed from his lips. “I just didn’t think... with me... it was going to last.”

Dream’s molars slot and clamp together with unspeakable ferocity, summer heat and summer showers blending the edges of his brain, George’s voice in the corners of each memory, his laughter, his blush, his touch in dreams; fleeting words on the phone.

*It did. It did. It did.*

He moves to place himself in front of George and forces his attention to flit back up. “I hoped so badly that it would,” George utters in a shared breath of Dream rasping, “It *will*.”

Autumn sits beyond their shared carpet and lamp glow, a breeze on wet window panes after hours of cold rain, reflecting back on the darks of George’s eyes as Dream gets lost in the *closeness* of him.

“I’ve been so worried you wouldn’t feel the same way about me still,” George says bluntly, chest shifting shallow. “I thought maybe you were getting over me while I was working on this stupid visa, and—and it wasn’t until I got here, and saw everything in person that you started proving me so, so wrong.”

“Oh my god,” Dream mutters. “You could’ve just *called* me.”

“I... I did,” George says quietly. “I called you, and I just ended up pushing us further apart, again.”

His slowing heart connects sparse memories, and his head slips back to August; their tense phone call, the low darkness of pushing and being pushed away, quiet words pleading, “*Can you stay, can we talk, can we pretend this phone call didn’t happen?*”

“I’m sorry, Dream. I still don’t know why I did that.” Pale hands folded in George’s lap slip together in a solitary clasp, subduing a light tremble Dream hadn’t caught before as he continues, “I guess the interview wore me down that day, and I shouldn’t have taken that stress out on—”

“The interview?” he questions, and George glances at him; they’d glazed over it briefly during his explanation of the visa timeline before, the last component to the application before submitting it for review. “That night you called me was the same day you had your interview?”

*You just wanted to be close to me, his thoughts tumble rapidly, and I didn’t let you. I didn’t know, and I blamed you, I didn’t know, and I hurt you, I didn’t know, and I—*

“It was never your responsibility,” George whispers. “I wish I could’ve told you sooner. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop. Stop saying that.” Dream’s voice slips from him with strain. “You shouldn’t be the one apologizing right now, I—”

“It doesn’t feel fair to come to you without a concrete answer,” George interrupts desperately, and his eyes drop to the floor as his face complicates again. “I thought it would be easier if nothing changed until I knew about the visa, and I—I can’t even think about if it doesn’t get approved—and now *you* have to worry about it too—”

“Jesus, so what if I have to worry?” His hand drops to cover George’s knuckles in an open offer. “I’ll worry *with* you.”

“Come on, Dream,” George breathes out. “What if it gets denied?”

“We don’t know that it will,” he says firmly. “We *can’t* know that, not until we hear back from them, but now that you told me, and now that I know, we can wait for the news *together*. Because that’s what this is now, okay?”

George’s face tips up at him with large, earnest eyes. He hesitantly slots their fingers in sync as he repeats, “Together.”

A rush filters through him. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” George says softly.

Their connected points of diminished distance are warm; Dream’s knee brushing his thigh, exhales tumbling to exposed forearms, George’s palm radiating under the gentle squeeze it’s given. Simplicity settles in the yearning silence, forgiving the dryness of their throats after too many hours of talking, and yelling, and falling back to whispers again.

“What about after we find out? What then?”

“I’m not… sure,” Dream answers. “I guess anything can happen.”

“…Doesn’t that scare you?”

He frowns lightly, rotating George’s wrist to brush a thumb in the center of his palm. “I’m not supposed to be afraid of things that are out of my control.” His touch lingers, presses down, and he admits, “But yeah, it does. It’s scary. Maybe when we find out it’ll be bad news, and maybe it’ll be really, really good. I mean, you could *live* here.”

“Maybe,” George says.

“Maybe,” Dream agrees, cheeks warming faintly. “Maybe I’ll—I’ll get to see you every day. Hug you in the mornings, and... teach you how to drive.” George huffs lightly, and he lets the sound amplify the growing hope in his heart. “We can go anywhere you want. Explore the whole country, or just stay here, inside. Patches would probably like that option the most.”

“Maybe she’d sleep in my bed instead of yours,” George contributes tentatively, and a warm smile blooms on Dream’s face.

*Maybe, his head offers, we could share.*

He quickly tosses the wayward thought away. “She definitely will if you start to feed her. She’ll also never let you sleep in past ten again.”

“I’m up early here anyways,” George says, his words wandering. “You’re noisy when you go in to brush your teeth.”

Dream’s face runs hot. “You can take the bedroom with the half bathroom, then. Problem solved.”

“Attach tin cans to a string and talk to you from down the hall,” he mutters dryly, and Dream sees the corners of his mouth tugging up.

“Sure thing, genius. Whatever you want.” He tilts their palms together, pressing light fingertips to the blunt edges of George’s nails. “I’ll make sure you love America, George. Scout’s honor.”

George flicks his gaze down as he falls silent, observing their lowering hands until they rest on the slant of his knee.

Dream’s smile fades. “Unless... that isn’t what you want?”

“No, it is—I’m not—” George sighs. “I just haven’t considered the possibility of this in a while. Letting myself think that way again after so much stress is... difficult.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, don’t—you really don’t need to think anything of it, okay?” George’s eyebrows pinch, and he brushes the pad of his thumb down Dream’s palm. “They’re my expectations. I’m meant to deal with them on my own.”

Dream stares candidly at the gliding touch exploring the dips and crevices of his hand, slow in its travels, forgiving in its wake. His face sinks slightly.

“On your own,” he echoes, and his voice grows quiet. “I don’t want these huge decisions to keep happening without me.”

George silently squeezes his hand; he squeezes back. “Is...” George clears his throat gently. “Is that everything?”

Dream lets out a slow sigh.

*The idea of a visa born months ago, the beginning of an application in hazy July. His head rolls over the roots and dirt of George’s decision again, and again, and again. A feared game of waiting since early August. Over two months of secrecy, alone and unsure and afraid.*

He falls back to George’s patient face again as he sits before him, ankles crossed and chest shifting in even breaths as Dream searches for his answer.

*How did this silence not eat you alive?*

A nervous flutter passes through his chest.

*How long have you wanted me more than I've ever known?*

The thought expands larger than he can carry and manifests in a helpless parting of his lips.

Dream releases George's fingers and slides warm palms over his jaw, pulling his face in until his lips connect to the skin of his forehead. His mouth presses firm above George's brow, thin strands of hair caught somewhere between his chapped lips, and George's light flinch before easing into the embrace.

Dream's heart hammers as he says, "Thank you, so much."

"Wh—*what?*" George breathes against his face. "Dream, you don't have to—"

"Thank you for the visa, for applying, for everything, *thank* you—"

"Stop *saying* that," George interrupts, pulling back. "It's just an application."

He tsks. "No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"It's *not*," Dream insists firmly, dropping his gaze down to search George's face. "You haven't wanted to get your hopes up about it, that's fine. I get it. But mine—mine are up, George. They're way up, because I can *see* how huge this is, and I know, for you, it must've been so—so—"

He kisses his forehead again.

"Oh my—you're such a *dork*," George dismisses, pushing him off with a stern expression despite the press in his lips. "Seriously, Dream, is that everything?" His tone softens. "Are we done?"

Heart pressing keen to the bones in his chest, Dream says, "I think we are."

A deep breath flees George's throat and lands on Dream's collarbone as his head dips forward, the brunt of his face disappearing, and a weight slumps on the curve of his shoulder. Dream blinks down at the dark threads of hair crowding his view, and he carefully lifts his hand to rest on the back of George's neck.

"Today has been the most exhausting day," George mumbles.

"Yeah," he says faintly, fingers curving over skin and the bristling end of George's hairline. "I'm exhausted, too."

He feels George sigh against the warm cotton of his shirt, dried since the earlier drenching, still carrying a faded scent of rain. His quick glance at the large windows lining the room confirms the sun has left them, hours of talking stealing the last shreds of light from an overcast sky. He opens his mouth to voice a timid offer of heading to bed, ending their tumultuous day for good, but a sudden mumble on his shoulder stalls his tongue.

"I want it, too, you know."

Dream pauses. "Want what?"

“That thing you said earlier. To—to see you every morning, and all.”

His face warms into a gentle smile. “Oh.”

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“I can hear you grinning,” George mutters against his shirt. “I don’t even need to look up.”

He bites back a light chuckle. “You can’t blame me, George, it’s nice to hear you say it.” George huffs before falling quiet, and Dream pushes, “Is… is there anything else you want?”

“I don’t know,” George says. “No.”

“Come on.” Dream slides restless fingers to toy lightly with the base of his hair. “After three months of sitting on this thing, *nothing* else comes to mind?”

His hand slows to a stall on the back of George’s head at his continued silence, and he carefully guides George’s head up. Dream meets his eyes again and wanders into the beauty of their brown. Hours before, fury flooded them, and only a soft semblance of guarded shadows hangs from the weight of his brow, curl of his lashes; slight tensing above his cheeks. A slow-lifting, determined squeeze takes hold of Dream’s heart in his ribs; he has yet to see a coveted emotion settled in George’s gaze. He hasn’t seen hope.

“I…” George gazes at him through the warming air and breathes, “I want to kiss you again.”

Dream’s eyes widen. “What?”

“I mean—no—why did I *say* that?” George leans back in a similar startle, words tumbling rapidly as he pulls Dream’s hands down, “I don’t know where that came from. I’m sorry. Nevermind.”

“No, no, no, hold on,” Dream says quickly, tongue uselessly numb behind his unclenching jaw. “Just go back for a second, I wasn’t—”

“Forget about it, Dream. Please.”

Drawing in a silent inhale through his nose to temper the race in his chest, he watches George avoid his overt attention again. “Obviously it came from *somewhere*,” he says. “I’m not gonna drop it.”

George’s eyes swing towards him, then plunge to their laps before the glinting bridge can linger. “That just—” His jaw tenses, and the light tint blooming on his face muddles Dream’s churning chest further. “That was embarrassing, okay? I’m embarrassed.”

“…In front of *me*?” he questions wildly and receives a weighted look. “Alright. Okay, George. Um, god, what was—” His gaze arcs high over George’s dark hair to scrape the ceiling above in recollection, cheeks growing warmer as he clears his throat. “I had another—another dream where I got to see you, I’m beginning to think they’re nightmares, I’m beginning to think you’re haunting \_\_”

“Oh god—”

“Haunting me,” he continues, face hot as his voice strains, “I’m reaching, and I can’t stop reaching \_\_”

“I get it, I get it,” George assures in a hush. “Please. You don’t need to keep going.”

“Just... don’t feel embarrassed about telling me stuff like that,” he says faintly. “Especially if it has to do with wanting to *kiss* me, god, I can’t tell you much I—I mean, I always want to, well, I’ve wanted to ever since the minute I saw you at the airport, really, you and your suitcase and you looked so—” He huffs shortly as George’s eyes snap up. “That’s not—okay. Nevermind.”

The steady thumping in his chest slows as his thoughts even out.

“You surprised me, that’s all,” he says softly. “Is kissing... something you’re okay with, now?”

George’s brows pinch together slowly. “Maybe... maybe it is.”

*Maybe, maybe.*

He tries to keep his head from darting back to dripping rain, damp bench-slats, warm lips and hot breath on the curve of his chin where George’s fingers drawled with grace. Regretless guilt lowers Dream’s gaze briefly to his mouth, and he hopes his own is being remembered, too.

“Maybe this isn’t just seven days anymore,” George adds, quieter, and his pulse heightens.

Dream reaches to touch his jaw. “Maybe we could find out how you feel.”

A light swallow bobs in George’s throat, and he brushes a brazen thumb over the rise and fall. He watches George part his lips, swipe over dry peaks to leave a thin glistening on the curve, letting each movement sink in consideration before faint words slip from them.

“Maybe we should,” George says.

An exhale blows out of Dream’s chest. “Okay,” he says, fingers brushing up to George’s cheekbone and dragging a pink blush in tow. “Okay. I’ll do it again, then. I’ll do it right this time.”

“Right?” George echoes, eyes slipping down.

“Softly,” he says, leaning and leaning until his breaths begin to drift back. “Slowly.”

Warm lips hover and shift in a light brush of his name. “Dream.”

“Close your eyes.”

“This feels dumb,” George whispers.

Dream smiles, and the tip of George’s nose nudges the lines on his cheek. “That’s okay,” he murmurs. “Can I kiss you?”

“Obviously.”

“George.”

“Yes,” he says, “yes, just, please, please...” His voice fades to a gentle exhale as Dream presses his lips down to the corner of his mouth, and then withdraws. “Hey.”

Dream’s jaw tips, drifts, and he kisses the other side with a scarce catch of George’s lips, chapped crevices on his mouth brushing the warm skin of his cheek. His hands guide George’s face back to center in a hovering brush near the bridge of his nose, and a pause of filtered, cyclical, fleeting breaths is shared between them.

George tilts his forehead up to carefully meet Dream's own. "I..." He clears his throat quietly and whispers, "I've wanted this for so long, you know."

Heat flushes on Dream's cheekbones and spreads through his skull until the warmth finally guides his eyes shut; ears red, bloodstream red, palms a cupping tremble on the sides of George's face. With a careful pull, he closes the gap from George's mouth, and the noise in his head subsides. Gentle, brushing lips rekiss after hours of separation, softly remembering years spent sharing two halves of the same dream.

The room is noiseless beyond them, no trace of interruption as long, clean fingers touch down on Dream's chest. He slows in consideration, the familiar hands spreading on his collarbones have pushed him away before, and he begins to withdraw tentatively. George's fingers twist into fabric folds on his chest, and he pulls Dream *closer*.

Coiled heat escapes his throat in a low breath. Warm lips part timidly against his own, dry mouths and shaky exhales meeting in daring tilt to their world, hovering atop of a precipice of change. George's jaw slackens in his hands and foundations crumble as Dream falls through. He releases tension wired in the cage of his teeth as his tongue slips into George's mouth. A slow, bathing warmth rises to meet him.

Pads of his thumbs press onto George's cheekbones, hands trembling still; *George* is held between them, his taste is on his lips, and Dream's eyelids grow heavy. Every soft slew and warm upstroke against his open mouth forces his pulse to stutter. A breathless burn builds in his lungs, air decreasing between them, but pinpricks of embers entice him to kiss deeper, and George kisses back, and deeper, and back, and softer, and back until a ragged breath splits them down the middle.

Saliva cools on the curve of his bottom lip, and George's pants blow hot against it. Dream lets his chest heave, head lost in a dizzied, ringing hum, and frizzy carpet burns against his heated limbs.

"Oh," George says as Dream's thumb trembles in a trace over his flushed lips, "my god."

Dream lets out a wordless breath in agreement. His grazing hand drifts up and cards fingers through the thick locks of George's hair, and a heavy exhale blows down from George's nose against his upper lip. Silence fights to relax them both; his jaw dropping to combat his labored speechlessness, George's mouth tipping up in a subtle inclination at the shift.

Dream's heart seizes. "God," he rasps aimlessly. "This is real."

A weak huff leaves George's mouth, breath hot on his chin. After a passing beat of recovering breaths, he huffs again.

"Are you—" The corners of Dream's mouth twitch up as George breaks into faint, clipping puffs. "Are you *laughing*?"

Wrists hanging from his grip on Dream's shirt, George passes breathy jostles between the bridge of his forearms. "N—no."

"You are." Dream leans back as suppressed laughter creeps into his own chest. "Why—why are you laughing?"

"I don't know," George says, voice pitching and drawing a chuckle from Dream's lungs. "Why are *you*?"

Thick air clouding around them disperses briefly into shared laughter, subsiding as George leans his face heavy into Dream's supporting hands. His head and heart are warmed at the weighted tilt

entrusted in his palms.

“We’re really tired, aren’t we?” Dream says breathlessly.

“Really, really tired.”

“This is—” He chuckles as George smiles again, eyes falling fondly to try and catch it. “This is a little too much right now, isn’t it?”

George nods slightly, head bobbing in Dream’s palms and delivering the motion to the fluff of his hair. Dream sinks his teeth into his cheek at the urge to tip his jaw and kiss the breath from his lips again.

“Alright,” Dream breathes. “Okay. We can—we can stop.” He pulls back slowly to see George’s face in full, and the drum between his ears grows louder and louder, blinding his thoughts and numbing his tongue until he blurts, “Do you want tea?”

A dazed smile rises across the sheen of George’s lips. “...What?”

“Some—some tea,” he stumbles. “Cause then we’re still here, but not just sitting here, because sitting here I feel like we’ll just—and I’ll keep wanting to—”

“Um, sure,” George interrupts lightly. “I guess tea sounds good.”

He lets go of a tight inhale. “Okay. Okay, great.”

“What uh, what kinds do you have?”

Dream clears his throat, parting their hands with a lingering squeeze. “I’ll have to check. My mom did stock us up when I told her what days you’d be in town, though.” He hears George scoff and smiles. “You have a lot of options to choose from.”

“She’s way too nice to me,” George says.

“She’s perfectly nice enough. So, do you want...” Dream’s eyes scan over their surrounding space, and he quickly grabs the blue-inked list discarded ages ago on the coffee table. “Mint, or—” He scans down the page with familiarity. “Earl grey?”

When he looks back towards George, the pale curve of his cheekbones are dusted with a prominent blush. “Mint is fine,” he answers faintly.

A flicker jumps in his chest and his eyes drop to George’s mouth. *Focus*. He ignores the freshly burned memories still buzzing on his tongue, and he rises off the rug. *Focus on the stupid tea*.

“Mint it is, then.”

He wills himself to leave George in the living room, busying his hands and brain with the cluttered herb assortment in the far kitchen cabinets. Fumbling fingers retract the mint box, green leaves illustrated beneath his shaky thumbs as he realizes how drained his body has become.

A harsh swallow presses down from his mouth, strangely cold in the absence of George’s hushed breathing into it. He hunts for the electric kettle and prays it’ll work after months of disuse.

*Months*, he thinks. *You could stay here for months*. His head teeters on the idea as he plucks ceramic mugs from a high shelf. *After that, maybe more. Maybe a long time. Maybe*.

He brings the empty kettle towards the tap as he mindlessly flips on the faucet. Water spits down in a sputter into a half-full basin, and his eyes collide with a soaked tangle of hoodie fabric still resting in the sink.

Forgetfulness drags through him. Stained and idle, George's jacket floats, and Dream lifts his gaze over the pony-wall towards his seated stature. He's finally moved to rest on the couch's sectional instead of the floor nearby, and Dream's list is held studiously in his careful hands.

He watches while tap water trickles into the sink. An earlier ghost of George he'd known would've disappeared into fog at the sight of such a vulnerable, humiliating list. Before he can consider glancing away, Dream sees what his eyes stayed in wonder for as the page flips in George's hands. Shielded from the angle of staring at his back, he catches the side of George's face lifting in a private smile.

His heart soars higher than neon. Filling up the water, setting it to boil, Dream decides to deal with the hoodie in silent adoration, too.

-

*(12:26 AM) Hi.*

Dream's back rises off of his bed, phone lifted from his mattress and into his palms before his eyes can recover from the harsh glow. He glances at the wood of his door, closed an hour deep after their goodnights resonated from a dim hall to part for good, and he types out a response with rapid thumbs.

*(12:27 AM) George*

*(12:29 AM) You seem surprised*

*(12:30 AM) thought you were sleeping*

*(12:31 AM) I've been trying to*

He blows out a breath and leans back into clean covers and sheets, batting away the light flick of a cattail Patches settles on his face. George had been on the brink of deep exhaustion when they'd reluctantly left the living room, returning pillows, refolding lists, offering to help put mugs in the dishwasher and check on the hoodie with a yawn between his words. Ever since he sent George upstairs and was isolated in the laundry room, a steady thrum of rain clothes in the dryer resonates in his mind; how could someone sleep after kissing him like that?

*(12:32 AM) is something stopping you?*

He doesn't get a reply for a moment, and his tiredness flees him for tilting curiosity.

*(12:34 AM) Just wanna talk to you*

A wide smile takes over Dream's features.

*(12:35 AM) come into my room and we can talk all you want*

*(12:36 AM) Ur dumb*

*(12:37 AM) it was worth a shot*

*(12:39 AM) I'd call you but I'm a little too tired to speak*

(12:40 AM) same

(12:41 AM) my throat feels like I've been yelling all day

Dream hesitates as the light swoosh of his message sends through, and he leans onto his side as his eyes drift up towards his street-facing window. Drawn curtains and blinds give hints of the same streetlamps' glow they'd wandered beneath the night prior, a hazy orange reminder of his own lack of sleep and toils of their day. His phone has been full of small texts from Sapnap reporting his boarding, take-off, landing, bathroom breaks scattered between, and he replied to them only moments ago when the world relaxed with him into his mattress.

His chest grows tight as he considers their drive home from the airport; their arrival after the clinic. He elects to send another message before George has replied.

(12:43 AM) I'm sorry by the way. really don't like when I get like that

(12:44 AM) ? Like what

(12:45 AM) raising my voice at you

Hovering bubbles of contemplating silence stare back from his screen, and he breathes out a deeply-hooked exhale. A quiet meow resounds from the nearby pool of fluff in response.

(12:47 AM) *You don't really do that, Dream. Your words just get very sharp, and you stare a lot.*

(12:48 AM) oh

(12:48 AM) is the staring a bad thing?

(12:49 AM) *I don't think so*

(12:50 AM) *Sometimes it just feels like you're seeing everything about me all at once.*

A light warmth tints on his cheeks, jaw pressed to the slant of his pillow. His eyes pass over the message again in selfish gratitude of being observed and *existing* to George, and he pushes the momentum in his chest further into the night.

(12:51 AM) maybe that's just what I look like when I'm trying not to kiss you

(12:52 AM) *I'm familiar with that look*

His heart picks up and he swallows faintly.

(12:53 AM) you know

(12:54 AM) nothing has to change now that it's just us. things can stay how they've been this past week if you want

(12:55 AM) *You're funny.*

(12:56 AM) I'm being serious

He deletes a furthering reply when George begins to type again.

(12:58 AM) *You have no idea how I feel about you, do you?*

*(12:59 AM) I applied for a visa. I came here. I want things to change*

Dream stares at his phone until the slight tremor in his hands urges him to offer a response. Warmth rises in his gut and he leans onto his stomach, intensely focused down at the rectangle of possibility in his hands. His glow reflects on the wood of his headboard.

*(1:01 AM) can u say that into a voice memo for me real quick*

*(1:02 AM) Lmao fuck off*

Dream huffs in amusement. His phone buzzes again and slices through his growing fondness as his eyes drop down.

A small, dashed indicator of a voice memo has appeared in their text thread. Eyes wide, he presses play, and George's recorded voice emits from his speakers.

*“Go to fucking sleep.”*

He laughs sharply, head wandering to a sleep-deprived George in the bed opposite the hall, lost in covers as he curses into the device with knowing indifference.

*I have missed this so much,* Dream types, and he deletes it before his fingers hit send. Words spring into his head and he passes his tongue over the back of his molars in consideration before continuing.

*(1:04 AM) that's kinda hot when you swear*

His own joke makes him scoff, shutting off his phone in a nervous tap on the rounded corner in waiting for a dismissive reply. Vibration skitters through his index fingers.

*(1:05 AM) Says you.*

“Oh.” His voice slips breathlessly, and his empty room offers nothing but the sound of his own flooding heartbeat back.

*(1:06 AM) give me something to curse about and I'll record it for you*

*(1:07 AM) What exactly are you asking for?*

“Oh,” Dream repeats weakly. A spurred warmth spreads to his face and is poorly barred by a nervous swallow, his disbelief ebbing in daring surprise.

*(1:08 AM) anything you'll give me*

His response feels safe, tentative and testing, and he wills himself to watch the unchanging ceiling of his room. The less expectations he has, the less the fall will be, George isn't an idiot, it's been a long day, they're both at the brink of extreme exhaustion and he'll simply go to sleep if he doesn't get a—

*Goog has sent you a snapchat.*

He opens the notification hastily, and the red square expands into an image.

It isn't much of anything he hasn't seen before, a half-shot of George's neck and jaw with covers and pillows in view, tinged with collarbones reminding him of something he already knows George prefers to sleep without. Yet the sight trapped in the cold, unfeeling dimension of his screen is

*different* after knowing how pale it compares to the warm skin and curved muscle he's witnessed up close in person, with wandering eyes or soft caresses or fleeting lips. His eyes bore at the image as the reminder rewrites him; he's kissed the throat he's gazing at, touched George's jaw and felt the hot push and pull from the mouth just out of frame.

He's almost sure that's why it was sent, to remember the kitchen counter; confront a type of truth he's supposed to know but somehow can't believe.

The nearly forgotten caption at the bottom reads, "*Hi from across the hall*" above a local filter with Orlando's name in bold. He smiles unexpectedly when he sees the colored letters and navigates back to their text messages with temperance in mind.

He records brief seconds of a short audio message and sends it through. Moments later, a flurry of responses hit against white background.

*(1:14 AM) I'm laughin so hard rn*

*(1:14 AM) Dream*

*(1:15 AM) What the hell was that*

He grins.

*(1:16 AM) what else did u expect from me*

*(1:17 AM) I literally don't even know*

*(1:18 AM) Definitely not you BARKING at me*

*(1:19 AM) You're so fucking weird*

His head drops into a faceful of pillow fluff as his breathy laughter rebounds, warmed and comforted in confidence. Neither of them type for a stretching moment of regaining scattered wits until Dream finally collects himself.

*(1:20 AM) sorry Georgie*

*(1:21 AM) had to let out my pent up feelings somehow*

*(1:22 AM) I'm gonna soundboard it*

Calm anchors in the depths of him at the ease of sharing the night together, even if only through fleeting messages. His face rests comfortably pink on the prop of his forearm, and pricks of relief consume him from the inside out.

His thumbs hit record for another voice message, and he decides to send it through instead of backing away this time around.

*George kept two audio messages from you.*

*(1:25 AM) Cute*

*(1:26 AM) I've really missed this, too.*

Dream's eyes droop happily, and he reacts to George's message with a heart. Tiredness fully creeps in as he gives into it voluntarily, knowing he'll see him in the morning, and knowing he'll have

plenty more chances to truly wish him goodnight.

-

Bristles of Dream's toothbrush glide over his molars, taste of mint spreading on his gums in a click of plastic against clean enamel. The urge to hum stirs low in his throat, but he keeps it to a minimum in preservation of the morning's silence; faucet left nonrunning, bathroom door ajar.

His bleary eyes return to himself in the dimly lit mirror, blinking until the image turns clear; sunken circles and unshaved shadows are poised with ease despite his early rise. Dream tips his head closer to the glass and brushes a thumb across his coarse jaw, tongue clicking in disapproval at the protruding stubble.

Bright bulbs flick on above his head, and his toothbrush nearly slips from his mouth.

“Oh!” The lift in George’s voice sounds from the pushed open doorway. “Sorry, I—I didn’t know you were in here.”

The change in illumination intrudes brighter than the window’s glow he’d been basking in, and Dream’s vision adjusts alongside the spike in his pulse. Hand floating near the switch as he blinks back, George seems rested in the threshold, face calm and colored above fitting pajamas. With a mouthful of foaming toothpaste, Dream gestures back in vague greeting.

“Finally,” George muses, tinged with amusement. “You’re a mime.”

Dream rolls his eyes and continues to brush noisily.

A softened smile rises on George’s face. “What’s that? You have something to say?”

He bends over and spits a pool of white into the sink. With a free tongue, he turns back to George and says, “You look very handsome this morning.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Dream tracks the growing tint on his cheekbones as he moves into the bathroom, rinsing off the brush blindly with restless fingers. The drain gurgles, George touches a hand lightly on his lower back to step around him, and his hips press against the sink.

“How’d you sleep?” George asks.

He drops his eyes to avoid seeing warmth bloom on his own face at the fleeting, insignificant touch. “Fine, Patches woke me up just a little bit ago. You?”

The drawer glides open to his left as a travel bag of toiletries is rescued from the wooden space. “I slept really well, actually.”

Dream’s hands slow in their storing away of his toothbrush, and he lifts his gaze gently towards George in the mirror. Though downcast and busied with the ceramic counter, yesterday lingers in the weight of his dark eyes. George never links “sleep” and “well” together in the same turn of phrase; the six years Dream’s tossed the question his way through texts or group calls or concerned one-on-ones, his answers are always one worded and wry.

*He’s being honest.*

Dream considers, then reaches and slings an arm over George’s shoulders to pull him into his side.

Fondness blooms in his chest despite George's stiffness under the motion, and he murmurs to the top of his hair, "I'm glad to hear that."

Warm against the coursing beats held in Dream's ribcage; warmer when he links his fingers with the hand draped over his shoulder, George mumbles, "Why are you so obsessed with kissing my head?"

"It's not my fault you're the perfect height for it," Dream argues, and George huffs.

"Yeah, and you're the perfect height for—" His voice cuts off sharply.

Dream's head turns. "What?"

"Nothing."

Their locked hands quickly slip apart, and Dream pulls his arm down with a widening smile. "For what?"

"Move out of the way so I can brush my teeth."

He steps back, and George slides into the space he'd occupied. Dream glances towards the door in candid hesitation.

"That doesn't mean you have to leave," George mutters before his parting lips can offer.

"Are you sure? If you want some privacy, I can—"

"I don't want you to go."

Suppressing the beginnings of a keen response from the uptick in his chest, Dream eases to lean against the wall. His view of the stretch of George's back is entrancing enough, shoulder blades shifting beneath a shirt too large, yet held in the mirror opposite his reflecting image expands. With smooth movements; neat follow through, George's fingers touch toiletries, the faucet, a hand towel hanging off the wall in rhythmic ease. He's always considered his bathroom a particularly private space, and sharing it with George over the past week has been sharing with a cleanly ghost. Yet George exists before him in the same mirror he's stared at, cried in, wished to break or begrudgingly cleaned.

*I've missed you from this bathroom, he thinks. I've called you, thought of you, taken pictures for you—all from here, before.*

"Are you just going to silently spy on me while I do this?" George interrupts lightly, a loaded toothbrush held in front of his chest.

"I don't have anything to say," Dream murmurs. "I'm just happy."

George's eyes flick up in the mirror. "You're not going to start barking at me again, are you?"

A sharp laugh leaves his lips. "I'm—I'm gonna keep giving you my undivided attention, if that's what you're asking."

He smiles at him, George returns it with a slight shake of his head, and their contentment of shared silences accumulates in soft brushing and light breathing under the bathroom lights. Quietness turns to hums, fostering jokes in an attempt to make George laugh, a spray of spit hitting the sink's curve only once successfully. A razor is withdrawn from the organized travel bag, and Dream ends

up sitting, then lying, on the bathroom rug while George carves away at his jaw.

“So Dream,” George says finally, and his eyes detach from drawing over the white ceiling.

“So George.”

George taps the razor's edge against ceramic, and a rush of water follows. “What is our plan for the day?”

“Well.” Muscles in his abdomen tense as his back rises off the mat, and he watches attentively as George passes over the last streak on his neck. “The weather is supposed to be pretty overcast for most of the afternoon, which is fine, but downtown isn't the most fun if it rains. Same goes for putt-putt. Or that gator place Sapnap was telling you about—”

“Threatening me with,” George corrects in a mutter.

“There's a list of outdoor stuff like that we can do when it's sunnier,” Dream continues. “Our best option is probably the aquarium. I haven't been in a few years, the drive is nice, my sister loves it there and it's—it's up to you, really.” He clears his throat. “Whatever you want to do.”

George's face tips up as he peers into the mirror. “Do you really want to risk going out?” he asks. “There's a good chance we could get recognized, again.”

“I mean, yeah, but...” Dream lets his voice trail, and his cheeks grow warm. “I want to show you everything.”

George lowers a fluffed towel from his jaw silently, and he turns to meet Dream's upward gaze. His pulse ticks heavy in his ears under the reception of long, lingering seconds.

“They're going to know what I look like when you move here, anyway,” Dream blurts, and he sees George's face soften.

“If I move here,” George says gently, “we will have plenty of time.”

Heat creeps over the bridge of his nose, and his head cools in recollection of the blurry morning before their kiss on top of the world; sweet pancakes and hot cocoa, George nodding off in his passenger seat on the drive home, glimpses of his lived-in town flashing through glass beyond the dark of his hair.

*Time.*

“Besides, we can easily figure out how to stay unnoticed in the meantime,” George continues. “I guess I can wear a mask at the aquarium and let people think I have a cold.”

His palms push off of cold linoleum until his standing gaze sweeps over George's head in the reflection, but George's attention is gone from him again, refocusing on cleaning scarce traces of shaving cream from the counter.

“All *you* have to do is keep your voice down—”

Doubled in the mirror and twice-questioned in his mind, his arms wrap forward around George's frame in a loose-hanging hold; fingertips on the curve of his shoulder, and a forearm crossing his middle. George jumps slightly, but warm shoulders melt back into his chest with a slow, sinking exhale.

“So I can’t talk to you,” Dream mumbles, strands of George’s hair catching on the side of his cheek. “And you can’t kiss me? That sucks.”

“I... I probably wouldn’t do that in public, anyway,” George says, hands slipping from the counter’s edge.

“M’kay.” He lowers his chin to George’s shoulder and pulls him closer with a squeeze. “You have before though, to be fair.”

George’s lashes nearly touch in a heavy blink downward as he breathes, “Dream.”

His pulse rises sharply with his gaze, and he finds George seemingly transfixed by their reflection. Gingerly placed hands are swallowed in fabric as Dream’s chest looms, George’s eyes drift slowly, the image in unfeeling glass giving reason to the persistent thump of his heart against sharp shoulder blades. Embers skitter down to his stomach, and he begins to memorize the disappearance of George’s collarbone and shoulder beneath his spreading palm before he blinks himself back down.

“Is this too much?” Dream asks quietly.

Dark eyes snap to meet him. “Not at all.” Warm fingertips begin to trace the length of Dream’s forearms, and the vibration of George clearing his throat startles his pounding chest. “No, not at all, this—this is... you’re so...” George’s palms travel over blond hairs and wide wrists until the peaks of Dream’s knuckles are covered by his guiding touch.

*Oh.*

Dream stalls the breath in his throat, and his reckless hands stir to gentle life, a palm rising on the side of George’s ribs as the other brushes fingertips towards the knit of his collar. Under every inch of soft fabric and warm body gained by the sprawl, he feels George’s exhales grow deeper against him. A brazen smile lifts from his lips, oozing with a nostalgic shade of glory.

“You really like this,” he murmurs. “Don’t you?”

George’s grip on the back of his hands tightens wordlessly, and his teeth sink into his cheek. Dream lifts knuckles to skim the smooth, shaven edge of his jaw, fixated on the motion in the mirror and drinking in each visible shift in George’s expression.

“George,” he says softly; a flush deepens on pale cheekbones. “I can see it on your face. Admit it for me.”

George sinks back further into him, and a sharp exhale scrapes past his teeth. His forearm locks against George’s stomach slightly, heart in his ears, and his eyes flick up.

“I think you might be enjoying it more than I am,” George observes, and the sight of his poorly suppressed smile turns the burn on Dream’s face into a scorching wasteland.

He swallows. “Maybe—maybe you’re right, but in my defense, you’re not the one facing—” His words catch in his throat as George turns around in his arms, close to his chest with a bump against thighs, piercing his inhales with a scent of fresh mint and clean lotion. Dream pinches his eyebrows together, and he *feels* George’s light laughter. “Okay. Okay, just, hold on.”

“You still want to go to the aquarium now?”

“Shut the fuck up, George,” he breathes out. “Why do you have to smell so good?”

“Is that a no?” George’s jaw tips up with the brightened gleam in his eyes. “You were so excited about it a second ago, but I have to admit, now it seems like—”

Palms on his back and nails curling in, Dream pulls him into a kiss, flush to the counter and soft on his lips. George’s breathy hum of surprise hits his mouth and heat floods down his throat, tipping further into a mess of sliding hands with molasses sprawl. The solid press of George against his chest and hips overcasts his thoughts in an immediate, consuming urge; *stay here, with me, insi—*

Dream pulls back from the warmth of George’s mouth wistfully, and he pants out, “Wait, wait. Aquarium.”

“Wh...” George’s shallow exhales beat against his neck. “What?”

Dazed fingers trace his gray-cotton ribs, shuddering lightly over bone. His nose bumps the bridge of George’s nose, and he swallows with difficulty. “We—we should probably go now, I mean,” he rasps, and his lidded gaze drops down to find dark eyes glued to the smear on his lips. “Before we can’t. Right?”

“...Right.”

The seconds tumble and Dream doesn’t breathe, lungs plagued by the humidity of an inverse forecast; a day with crowding heat and dripping kisses and the softness of George’s tongue, relearning tastes from yesterday, learning if teeth can bite or lips can pull and how to guide more than quiet breaths from his throat. Not a glance of the blue-tanked aquarium passes through his mind.

“Dream?” George interrupts, his voice dropping low. “Can... can we please just do this all day?”

Dream exhales into a wide smile, and he glides warm hands up to George’s jaw. “Thank god, yes, yeah, of *course* we can.”

George pulls back briefly to meet his eye. “Tomorrow we are leaving this house.”

“Oh, one-hundred percent, we will,” Dream swears; he kisses him again in chaste temptation, and his heart skips at the tenderness of George’s immediate sigh. “Tomorrow I’ll take you out, we’ll see some fish and get some food, maybe we’ll eat some fish, actually, how’s *that* for romantic—”

George smothers the grin from his lips, and his mouth tastes like toothpaste.

Dark shadows loom in a sprawl over Dream’s unspinning ceiling fan; breezeless night beads on his neck and drips down his spine. Seated on the edge of his bed, his bouncing knee sends an endless jostle up his elbow to the cold phone screen pressed against his cheek.

The device rings out a stretching, repetitive chime in his ear, his teeth hold onto the edge of his thumbnail, and the outgoing call hits a full voicemail box barrier. His phone flashes back to Patches’ face behind an overlay of apps, numbers hovering above her wide pupils.

3:17 A.M.

He blows out a shallow breath from his throat, and he hits the option to try again. A call casts out, the tethered line bobs, and he hears the receiver click as the connection tugs through.

“Hel—”

“George applied for a visa and he kissed me,” Dream breathes out.

After a stretch of tense, unforgiving silence, Sapnap says, “George *what*?”

“He kissed me on top of the parking garage, and then again yesterday, and a lot of times today, we had a really long fight and I almost killed a bird but now I think we’re kind of—”

“A visa?” Sapnap interrupts in a whisper-shout. “To live in *Florida*?”

“*Yes*.” He rises off the bed and steps onto the pale hue of his carpet. “I promised him I wouldn’t say anything when you were here but I just kissed—said goodnight to him in the hall, and I asked if I could talk to you about it now and he was like, ‘if that’s what you need to feel okay with all of this, then sure,’ so here I am, telling you, and—”

“Okay, Jesus, that’s great news,” Sapnap mutters. “Holy fuck, you’re making my head hurt, when... when is he going to move in?”

“Well.” Dream’s eyes swing towards the ceiling, and he clears his throat. “We don’t know for sure, yet. The application hasn’t been approved.”

“What? Dream, why didn’t you *start* with that—”

His shoulders pinch with the rise in his tone. “I know, I know, but it’s only a matter of time,” he insists. “He’s a little apprehensive about it still, so maybe don’t ask him unless he brings it up, okay? I promised I’d handle you for him, if you have any questions just... ask me instead.”

A tapering exhale flees his chest, and his eyes grow easy on the open window. Warm air floats through the screen in a silent billow of his curtain, the folding ghost giving glimpses of a net blue crossed by stars and a hanging moon. The emptiness of his room glows back, stark in solitude after hours of having George by his side; even Patches’ usual purring is kept walls away in the vacant bedroom. He studies the door briefly, wondering if George has fallen asleep by now, and realizes the humming silence on the phone line.

He glances at the ongoing seconds on the screen. “Sapnap? You still there?”

“Uh, yeah, totally,” Sapnap responds. “Look, the visa is super cool, I’m super happy for you guys, but right now isn’t really a—” Static shifts, and his voice drops to a whisper. “A good time.”

His eyebrows knit together, and his eyes narrow at the darkened wall. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, dude—”

“Then why are you talking like that?”

On the opposite end of the call, he catches a faint voice mumbling, “S’that Dream?”

The audio is plunged into sudden muffling, and his ears strain to discern hushed whispers, shifting fabric, settled by Sapnap speaking soft phrases of “*fine*” and “*back to sleep*.”

“Is...” His pulse beats heavy as his eyes grow wide. “Is somebody *with* you?”

“I’ll call you back tomorrow, okay?” Sapnap hurries.

“Oh my god.” Dream’s voice raises with a grin. “Somebody’s with you.”

“Dream, I swear to god, I am hanging up now and you’re gonna leave it—”

“Put me on speaker,” he demands, fingers tightening over the phone as he paces deeper into his room. “Click it right now, I’m begging you, who—whoever is there, take his phone and click the —”

“Tell him to go away,” the voice emits again, and Dream’s footsteps die. Tinny words echo into black silence, trapped between his ear and synthetic glass with clarity.

*I knew it.*

Subdued huffs and words prod through the background, and he catches Sapnap murmuring, “—course he heard that, dummy. What do you... you wanna say hi, now?” The volume shifts as Sapnap’s voice hardens. “Dream. Don’t be weird.”

Dream holds his breath in his throat, and he listens intently to the shuffle and pass of the phone until his greeting arrives.

“Hello, parrot boy.”

*I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.*

Dream pinches the bridge of his nose, and he mutters, “Hi, Karl.”

The most telltale giggle in the world filters back.

His lips twitch into a smile, and he clears his throat in a weak cacophony. “So,” he says. “Tasted any orange juice, lately?”

“*Dream.*”

“You know what, I think I have, actually,” Karl muses. “Awesome brand from someone called ‘your mother’—oh c’mon, Nick.” His voice slips farther away. “Give it back—”

“I hate you,” Sapnap fumes directly into the mic, and Dream tips the speakers from his ear with a grin. “You have ten seconds. Say goodbye.”

“Bye-bye!” Karl’s voice calls.

“I’m so sorry for finding out this way even though I kind of already knew,” Dream rushes, voice pitching louder at the sound of Sapnap’s groan. “I love you! I appreciate you! I’m so proud of—”

The audio dies in an abrupt click. He smiles dazedly and tosses his phone to the edge of his bed, a list unfolding in his mind—once crumpled in the booth of a diner, each line bulleted by weeks of observation and months of suspicion—and satisfaction flickers through his chest.

“I’m a *genius*,” Dream mutters.

His room responds with silent indifference. He scowls, eyes drifting back to the closed door.

*I have to tell George.*

He leaves his bed and mind behind for the cold handle of his door, and dusty darkness of the hall splits open before him in a blink. With each step through the haze of late-night air, an unfamiliar dread accumulates in his stomach.

*I can’t not tell him.*

George's door approaches him swiftly and his hand lifts to knock, but the fierce tension in him doubles, spreading in a crawl from his abdomen to his throat. The soft mumbles and shift of blankets he'd listened to on call echo in his ears, chased by his rationalization; tonight is surely the first of Karl's stay in Texas, a trip likely planned for ages similar to his own September, and they all had stayed up late on the first day of George's visit, too.

*Back to sleep, Dream mulls over Sapnap's barely audible words again, teeth shifting in a light clench. I woke them up, together. They went to sleep together.*

He scrapes his eyes down George's door, and his knuckles rap absently against the hard, closed off wood. The veil of trepidation is lifted from him swiftly as envy grabs him by the jaw.

*Why can't I have that with you?*

“Oh.” Dream’s ankles shift in a half-step backwards. “Wait, this... this is...” His head turns in gravitation back to his room, busy journal pages, remembering the written exercises to *think, Clay, look at the impulse, see if it has value, or if it's just a—*

“Dream?” George’s voice mumbles from nearby, and his eyes swing back.

*Bad idea.*

“George,” he breathes.

*Fuck.*

The entrance to his room is partially open, and dark grooves on the wooden door cut off in sharp contrast to George’s face of ivory, paleness descending down his neck, the muscled slope of his shoulders, bare collarbones and chest and stomach half-filtered by shadows until meeting the waistband of his sweats. Behind a slight rub from slow-moving knuckles, his bleary eyes don’t seem to catch Dream’s open stare.

“Is—” George yawns and covers it with the back of his hand before blinking dazedly, continuing in a low-voiced rasp, “Is everything okay?”

His teeth find the inside of his cheek. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you, I just...” He gestures uselessly over his shoulder with the point of his thumb, fingernails curling into his palm. “I had this weird phone call with Sapnap, and uh...”

The bush of George’s brows knit slightly above squinting eyes, and Dream wades into the stare. His pounding heart courses with their day in its entirety; kissing George by the bathroom sink and again into the rumbling dryer, hugging him before the fridge, being pulled down to the couch, laughing until his inhales stung, and eventually exchanging simple ‘*goodnight*’s in the same, dark doorway.

George tips his head in patient waiting, and the words tumble from Dream’s mouth.

“Do you wanna sleep in my room tonight?”

His own eyes widen as the question slips out, and George’s alertness shifts visibly before him. Night air draws into his chest, dense with swirling fear of returning to his room alone; pushing George farther away than across the hall. Lingering untouched between them, the offer hangs in honesty, and Dream doesn’t try to withdraw it.

“In your bed?” George asks slowly.

He swallows. “Yes.”

“With you?”

“Yes.”

George blinks at him. “I’ll go grab my stuff.”

“*Really?*” he exhales, head tipping through the doorway as George steps back into the room. “Are —are you sure?”

“Yes,” George tosses simply over his bare shoulder, plucking a pool of pink fabric from the floor. Lean muscles shift in a rise of sparsely freckled skin on either side of his spine, blades and bone disappearing as fabric cascades from the back of his neck. His exposed forearms reach into the bed’s disturbed blanket mound, and he withdraws a pillow and phone before wandering back towards Dream.

He leans back breathlessly as George slips by, and his hand jolts when warm, firm fingers wrap over his wrist. He’s tugged down the hall with gliding, floaty steps, sliding their hands together, and George glances back with a soft-lipped smile the same shade as the t-shirt hanging from his frame.

“You are the prettiest person I’ve ever met,” Dream says softly.

“Oh my god.” George’s eyes skip forward as they breach the bedroom’s threshold, and he mutters, “Please don’t watch me sleep.”

Dream grins at him lightly and gives his hand a squeeze; George passes it back, he squeezes again. Their fingers slip apart with ease as George tosses his pillow to the bed, and the pastel stretch of his back flops down in a flattening of creased covers after it. Dream’s gaze rakes over the blanketed sight, and chords of his heartbeat begin to crescendo in his ears.

“...Dream.”

He lowers in a soft sink to the edge of the bed. “Right. Sorry.”

Shifting towards the window’s glow, George huffs in amusement. “What the hell did Sapnap say to you?”

His eyes swing right. A curious smile springs across George’s face, cheek turning against the pillow, and he gazes up.

“George,” Dream says warmly, flopping down on his back to join him. “You are *never* going to believe what happened.”

## Chapter End Notes

soooo much fluff, I despise them. this chapter is hopefully a bit of fresh air after the last one, I had a lot of fun writing it and definitely got carried away lol, excited to see what you all think !! coming uploads might not be as long, but maybe (heh) that will mean shorter breaks between :))) thank you all for your patience and comments and joy. I am so grateful. u are all superstars. (especially zach, thanks for everything)

see u next year! :) <3

## Ratio

### Chapter Summary

Aquariums, crushes, and phone calls.

### Chapter Notes

Hello all! A couple reminders readers before scrolling:

- George is wearing a mask during their public scenes for identity reasons, a certain viral pandemic is not present in the DL universe (beta readers got confused smh)
- I know I said it'd be shorter and it sort of is but mostly I lied
- Please try not to mention this to CC's
- If you're stealing and reposting my work, boo, but if you're not going to stop please just format / italicize correctly ... if you see someone reposting it, ask them to take it down or at least to ^^^ make it look right, thank you!

// This chapter contains implied sexual content & M rated language. Be warned. Check tags.

Happy reading. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Warm water parts beneath Dream's reaching fingertips, aqua rising over his bare knuckles until the lapping surface bands around his wrist. Blues go purple in a crawl up his forearm, blond hairs suspended in their silent glide, and dappled through the water in deep, drifting bliss, jellyfish float beneath his stretching palm. The curve of his long fingers touch down on a mound of moonlight.

A subdued breath escapes him.

Translucent film slips delicately against his fingertips, gooey and thin, and the moon jelly tilts away with grace. A quake begins in the epicenter of his palm; saltwater nudges the corners of his eyes. His hands seem too large to hold such a gentle creature.

“Dream?”

His hands trapped them in glass, stole them from a quiet home, tipped the jars and held them up to gaze at their billows through white-hot sunlight. Grubby fingers clutched the cages on the long rides home; he'd blink and they were gone, dead, dissolved, only taught to take their beauty and never to make it last.

A cold hand brushes against his knuckles. Under the rippling surface, George's fingers drift in a wash of the same lunar shade, pale and slender, and Dream recoils his touch in fear it'll tear straight through.

“Where...” George's voice trails softly. “Where are we?”

His eyes snap up and the world floods back in a bloodrush; shoes bustling the lobby floor, nearby children's chatter, gurgles from a long row of open touching tanks. Overhead fluorescents and blue-shirted employees dot the corners of his swinging gaze until he meets George's stare.

"What'd you say?" Dream breathes out.

"I asked, 'where are you?'" A soft huff blows out the cloth covering George's mouth. "You just totally disappeared on me."

Dream pulls his hand from the glassy edge, ignoring how droplets shake down his palm. "Sorry, I'm sorry, what—what were we talking about?"

George's brow furrows, eyes hanging dark over the fabric pinched across his nose. "That look is on your face again."

"What look?"

"Your... dreamland one," George says. "The one you have when you're not sleeping well."

His jaw tilts up in avoidance of the deep-tanked jellies, swimming, silent, clouding the edges of his mind as he clears his throat. "Ah." He offers up a smile. "So *you're* watching *me* sleep?"

"Did us being up late give you bad dreams last night?"

The unwavering flatness in George's voice forces him to sigh, and he silently mourns the masked absence of his lips, hidden freckles on his nose, only a hint remaining of the cheekbones he'd studied in early light before day broke into noon. Truthfully, after shameless gossip turned to mumbles and nodding off at George's side, he'd had the most peaceful night of sleep for the first time since early summer.

"Don't you go worrying about me," Dream dismisses. "I'm the one who kept *you* awake."

George tosses him an eye-roll. "Exactly. I think we both need eight solid hours tonight."

"Are you threatening to never cuddle with me again?"

"What? We didn't even—ugh. Stop that." Saltwater is flung from George's fingers to land in a spackle across his shirt, and he continues, "All I'm saying is you seem tense. You weren't in the car, but you are now, and you keep yawning."

"It's not because of you." Dream wanders down after him in the line of open, glowing tanks, and he settles on a partial truth. "I have a fear of getting stung, that's all."

"You were just telling me these ones don't sting you."

"Well, technically, they *can*," he says. "Their underbelly has hundreds of short little tentacles that are mostly harmless to humans, but if they pull you in close enough—" He reaches out to graze fingernails over George's upper back as he leans forward. "They'll get you."

George's shoulders rise in a sharp tilt away. "Ew, god, at least use the hand sanitizer."

"You are such a germaphobe," Dream says fondly. "Six years. You hid yourself so well."

"I'm not. You're just handsy and you touch everything."

His eyebrows raise. "Would me washing my hands be a turn on for you?"

“Why the hell do you ask me stuff like that when I’m trying to be serious?”

“Because I’m trying not to be.” Dream lets out a slow breath in exasperation. “Look, George, aquariums are romantic, okay? Let me romance you, let—let Florida and her awesome animals seduce you—”

“You’re insufferable,” George mutters, and the soles of his shoes scuff the linoleum as he makes for the open stairs.

“Okay, hey, hey, I’ll be serious,” Dream says lightly, and he successfully stalls George on a low step before he can ascend any higher. “Yes, I’m a little tired. It’s fine. Can’t we just have fun today without talking... talking about *me*? ”

George peers at him from his newly gained eye-level, and he says, “Clay.” The agreed upon name passes carefully through the public air. “I *want* to hear about you.”

Dream tutts and gives him a look.

“Okay, no.” George scoffs. “We don’t know *everything* about each other. That’s impossible.”

“Are you saying there’s stuff about you that I don’t know?”

George resumes his march on the stairs. “Probably.”

“*Probably?* ” Dream steels his voice mindfully lower as he strides up after him. “Like what?”

“I don’t—I don’t know. Stop deflecting onto me.”

He grins, fingers gliding up the shining curve of the metal handrail. “You just can’t think of anything, because you know I already know everything.”

“It’s hard to come up with something on the spot,” George tosses over his shoulder.

“Mhm. Well, when you *do* think of something, feel free to let me know. I’ll add it to this list I have with your name written *all* over it—”

George turns as they reach the apex of the stairs, and Dream nearly stumbles into him, chest before his covered nose and eyes stuck to the dusty browns of his hair. Faint shampoo, his shifting breaths; they’re close, closer than they’ve been since morning, since he woke with his forearm searing hot over George’s waist and willed himself to pull it away. Restlessness stirs in his complaisant fingers at his side, still damp from seawater.

An hour beforehand on the sunny drive down, windows unrolled and humid breeze in their clothes, George’s hand slipped from his to nudge the music to a muffled lull. Voice breathy around the edges from a recent bout of laughter, he asked:

“*Can you do something for me?* ”

Dream swore to. Anything, he’d swear to.

“*I might need... space, while we’re out. Is that okay?* ”

His fingers drifted across the space between them and squeezed George’s knee in a firm, unspoken, resounding, “*of course.* ”

“Here’s something about me,” George says keenly, and Dream tips his head. “I would really like

for you to carry my camera.”

“That one I could have guessed.” Dream sighs, and he dips down with a dramatic hand tucking behind his spine. “Knight me.”

A familiar scratch of nylon is hung across the back of his neck. “Please. You’re not chivalrous enough for that.”

“Ouch,” Dream feigns, straightening up slowly with the weight of the camera suspended in George’s palms. “Is this how you flirt with me? Is that why I missed it for so many years, you just use insults?”

“You missed it because you weren’t looking.” George’s fingers adjust the cushioned strap with similar ease, and he clears his throat lightly. “Same rules as last time, ‘kay? Keep the lens cap on, and don’t let it swing.”

Fingernails skim down his t-shirt in an absent snag of fabric, and the bulk of the camera is relaxed against his sternum.

“Hey,” Dream says softly, and George’s eyes lift. “I’m looking now.”

His heart thumps against the boxed oculus for several filtering beats as George stares back, unreadable and dark. A rise of pink creeps past the edge of his mask, and Dream’s fingers grasp the outside of his pocket, patiently watching it spread.

“If you want to take some pictures with it,” George suddenly offers, “you can.”

Dream’s eyes widen. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.” He doesn’t need to see the curve of George’s mouth to know it bears a smile; warm in the shine of his gaze, pressed inside the lift of his voice. “Let me show you how.”

-

Sunblades descend from slanted glass high over the indoor habitat, glowing edges of George’s hair into rich ochre as they wander alongside a beach man-made; flitters of feathers, bird tracks in graham, humidity a damp rub on the strap across Dream’s neck.

“A bloom of bioluminescence,” George muses. “That sounds kind of cool.”

“Wh—” Dream’s jaw comes to a close at the end of a yawn. “What does?”

Sharp corners of a three page pamphlet nudge his chest from the pinch of George’s fingers; he glances down at photographs of glowing waters, Florida’s coast mapped in blue, lettered fragments of “algae” and an autumn countdown. The kayaking-tourist lure blurs before his vision in another light yawn.

“Epic.” They pass a nearby crowd; Dream’s voice dips low. “It’s probably fake, though.”

The brochure is refolded away. “Have you ever tried to go see it?”

“Nope. Don’t like southern Florida.” Silent beats pass through his chest before he offers, “But if... if you wanted to go, you know, we could easily do the drive. Make a day of it.”

George hums briefly. “No. If you don’t like it, chances are I probably won’t either—*oh*.” A flash of feathers ducks through dappled greens overhead, and his wrist rises to point. “There it goes

again. What kind is that?"

Their shoes slow in a drag on the median path as Dream's eyes chase after it. "Looks like... an ibis. A white ibis."

"A white ibis," George echoes softly. "And what do they eat?"

A small smile presses from Dream's lips, and as facts stolen in secrecy from nearby informational signs begin to tumble from him, the warmth in his core slowly spreads to his hands. He presses down clumsy thumbs in three clicks of the camera's shutter; once for the memory of a pink-billed bird, and twice for the curiosity in George's upcast eyes.

*What's that one called?*

The camera clicks.

*This looks like you, and click. The glass is cold, and click. Don't use the flash, and click.*

Odd lights on George's shoulders, their shoes above watery floor, the calm when crowds of people part, and a hand he longs to hold pressed before a passing turtle—*click, click, click, and click*.

Occasionally, George motions for the camera with angled fingers or a simple glance, and Dream leans back as he leans in, the strap never leaving his shoulders even while George's hover close in front of his chest.

"You're not allowed to delete any of these," Dream murmurs, gazing down as nimble hands recap the lens.

"Wasn't planning on it," George says happily and gives the hanging band a tug. "But I'm selling yours on stream."

Dream's teeth sink into his cheek. He wants to free George's face and capture it in the soft blue light, store it quietly in the screen knowing that *he* took it, *he* made him glow, *he* caught such a soft-hearted secret never to be shared.

Exhibit after exhibit, George leads him to walls of water and gets lost in their hue. Each bright flash of fish is an uptick in his heart, a need to wrap his arms around George's waist again like in yesterday morning's mirror—hold him, feel him, not let him slip away—yet he keeps his fingers to the camera's sleek sides and pretends the depleting battery is enough power to urge him through.

They reach the jellyfish room, and his hands fall still.

"Cnidocytes," George is reading aloud, and Dream's eyes drop to the slanted infographic at their hips. "Odd way to say, 'this stings.'"

"...It's Greek, I think." *I know.* Dream brushes a thumb over the dimly lit word. "It means nettle."

"Like the bush? Stinging nettle?"

"Guess so."

Phantom pinpricks skitter across his chest as they wander over carpet in a sparsely crowded room. Pale jellies float in a low-ceilinged, neon gallery, and his hand tightens on the camera strap to avoid pressing fingers to his pulse.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I accidentally fell into some nettle?" George asks, voice lulling

him back from elsewhere in the floating blues.

He blinks. "No, actually."

"Ah, well." George leans back and tips his jaw, audibly smug. "There's something you didn't know."

A soft hum warms in his throat. "How do I know you're not making that up?"

"Why would I make that up?"

"To prove a point."

"I'm not a liar."

"You're not a liar," Dream agrees. "But sometimes you *avoid* the truth. That's lying by association."

A dramatic sigh compresses George's chest. "The stupid bush pricked me, I waited a few hours before finally going home to tell my parents, and it sucked. How's that?"

Dream smiles wryly. "Why'd it take you so long to let them know?"

"I don't really remember *why*." George leans back against the wall, profiled in soft light from a nearby window of jellies. "I was probably pretending to run away, or something dumb like that."

His voice softens. "How old were you?"

"Nine or ten, maybe."

"And why would ten year old George be running away from home?"

George scoffs at his lingering smile. "Do you mean that time specifically, or in general?"

"In *general*? What were you, like, some little deranged criminal?"

"As if *you* never ran away when you were younger."

"I mean, I may have," Dream defends. "But only when I was a dickhead teenager trying to prove a point to my mom, or... or start something I couldn't finish."

"Right." George's eyebrows raise. "You were such a menace."

"I... I kind of was. You know that." His fingers flatten in a rub against his neck. "As soon as I started talking to you, though, I became less shitty. Or better. A better person."

George leans off the wall. "I don't think that has anything to do with me."

"I think it has everything to do with you."

George's eyes break away in a drop down his chest. Dream unhooks the camera from his neck and passes it wordlessly through iridescent light.

"Why *did* you run away so much?" he resumes curiously, looping the cord with slack over George's shoulders.

"I just liked being outside." George peers down at the screen, fabric folds on his mask turning

white from the camera's glow. "It's not like I had a ton of friends growing up. My sister was too young to go exploring. I spent a lot of time on my own." Controls shift and emit beeps under his fingertips before he stalls, and he huffs. "The time I'm remembering was on her birthday, actually. I'm pretty sure I left because my mum made *my* cake recipe, on *her* day. Can you believe that?"

"You poor, spoiled boy," Dream says fondly, and George's hand thumps his shoulder.

"It felt like the end of the world at the time, dickhead."

"Okay, okay." Dream's fingers clutch his arm in a pointless sprawl, and he clears his throat. "So, I'm ten year old you, and it's the end of the world."

George laughs, lazily pacing forward. "And you have a to-go bag."

"I have a to-go bag?" Dream grins. "That's awesome. You were so cool. Where the hell do I go?"

"Anywhere for a few hours, then you'll come back." George lines up in aim of nearby glass, a subtle shot rings out, and the device is brought down slowly in his palms. "Sometimes, though, I followed telephone wires out until I found those empty transmission fields. With the high power lines that seem like they go on forever. You have those here, right?"

Dream nods slightly. Warmer memories of buzzing electricity, hot sun, blue skies, barefooted swamp wanderings and accidental blood blisters begin to breathe through his mind. The tall towers stretch in his childhood eye, and he wonders if they're constructed with the same iridium gray on George's side of the ocean.

"I climbed one of the lattices," George continues, "and I got pretty far up before I slipped and landed in the nettle."

His floating heart plummets to their shoes. "*George.*"

"What?"

"You—you could've *died*," Dream forces out.

"Okay, calm down, I clearly didn't," George says, hands gesturing in a motion that makes Dream bite back his words.

"You got lucky," he whispers sharply. George tsks and begins to wander; he avidly flows after. "Who knows what could've happened to you, what—what did your parents say?"

A shrug passes through George's shoulders. "Nothing."

Dream stares down at his side. "You were gone for hours, and you came home covered in stings."

"They gave me stuff to treat it, so I did, and that was it."

His feet slow in a flattening stall, watching George snap another photograph and move on through the dim space fluidly as though experiencing it alone. Wordlessly, Dream feels himself creep towards the edge of an overwhelming understanding, or knowing absolutely nothing at all.

"...That was it?" he echoes, catching up to his side. "Really?"

"Well, I *did* find a piece of cake leftover that night," George adds lightly. "I was shivering half to death in front of the fridge, rashes all up my arms, and I'm not even sure who saved it for me, but—" A strange pause softens his words. "My name was on the cling wrap. It's still... still the

sweetest slice I've ever had."

Dream's eyebrows draw together in a silent pinch. He lifts a tentative hand, mirroring instructions of the moon-bay guidelines, and he touches down on George's back with two, light fingers.

"If I knew you back then," he says, "I would have been there. Call me dumb, but I mean it."

George's head turns towards him, gazing up. "We would've been friends?" he asks softly.

"*George*. We would've been *best* friends, are you kidding me? I mean, I—I probably wouldn't have let you climb so high, and I would've hated the almonds in your cake, but yeah. Absolutely friends." He feels George relax back into the silent spread of his palm, and his chest expands. "Also, I'd have a huge crush on you."

Laughter jostles against his hand. "That I can believe."

He brushes a thumb over the cloth on George's spine, and he says, "I was stung once, too."

His jaw tightens as the words slip by.

*Shit.*

"...By nettles?" George asks.

"By cnidocytes," Dream corrects awkwardly. "Jellyfish. But it's—it's a dumb story, really. Everyone who lives here gets stung eventually. Guess you'll be next."

The muscles in George's back stiffen.

*Fuck. Shit, shit, shit.* His heartbeat pounds up to his throat, and he clears it once. He clears it again. "That was a bad joke."

A gleaming, long-tendrilled jellyfish floats by the window silently in lieu of George's response, and Dream's gaze drops, landing on his idle hands lingering on the camera. The cylindrical lens rolls back and forth between George's fingers in an absent, repetitive motion. Air pushes down Dream's tongue in a tight swallow.

*You know.*

"If it's not something you want to talk about," George says quietly, "just tell me. You don't have to joke."

*You see me.*

"I'm sorry," Dream mutters. "It *is* important, I just... I haven't thought about it in a while. Or told anyone. The whole thing landed me in a ton of trouble and—" A sigh pushes through him from deep leagues down. "Shit. Okay. Remember all those crazy screen restrictions I had when we first met? The curfews, and the Tuesday things?"

He sees George's eyes widen slightly. "This is why?"

"This is why," he says. "I was fifteen and stupid, and I stole my mom's keys to drive to the coast. Which isn't *terrible*, I guess, except it was the middle of the night and I'd never driven on the freeway before." His fingers leave George's back to rub at his eyes. "Plus, nobody knew where I was going except for—for Nick, and that's just because he wouldn't leave me alone."

Blurry dials on the dash, phone snarling in the coffee-stained cup holder, picking up and a soft-cracking voice urging through; *East or West? Stop fucking around, Clay, tell me—East, or West?*

"My head would get so hot back then. Sometimes I felt like I couldn't think, or move or breathe unless I tried to—" His huff splits. "To cool down."

Sudden warmth blooms against his side from the press of George's shoulder, gently sinking against his ribs. Dream's lungs slow. He returns his hand carefully to George's back, fingertips gliding; settling on his waist featherlight.

"I found a dock," he says. "The water was still, *so* still, I dove in and..." His voice drops to a wondering, arid mutter. "Everything was black beneath the surface. It was quiet, and warm. Like swimming through tar."

Dark hair tilts towards his chest. "That seems... okay."

"It was more than okay," he breathes, "until it wasn't. This terrible pain came out of nowhere, and my entire body froze up. It was everywhere. I felt awful." He feels the inclination of George's head; avoids the heavy stare from his eyes. "Turns out some jellyfish attacked me, and I couldn't even see where. I've kind of hated them ever since."

Silence crawls into his lungs; sinking, and sinking, and sinking.

"...How were you able to get to the shore?"

"I don't remember." His voice tilts wryly. "Willpower?"

George doesn't laugh. "How did you get back to your house?"

He exhales. "I didn't. I mean, I did, sort of, but only after my mom got Nick's calls and she found me and the doctors said it was fine for me to go home—"

"Doctors?"

He winces. "I warned you it's dumb."

"You had to go to a hospital."

"I had water in my lungs and giant stings across my chest, so yeah, I did." Dream's jaw clenches at his own slipping words, and he gathers the nerve to reconnect with George's eyes. "I was fine, honestly. All the marks faded before I could even show them off, I mean, except for the one on my —"

"*That's* what that is?" George leans back, and Dream's palm slips down. "I thought you had a—a birthmark, or something, not *scarring*."

"You..." A smile rises carefully across his face, and he peers down. "You *were* checking me out in the hot tub."

"Wh—no, I wasn't, can you focus?"

"You totally were." Dream splays his free palm over his rib cage knowingly, heart racing beneath it. "It's not easy to see, George. You must have been *staring*."

"Shut the fuck up, okay, who doesn't mention something like that to their—" George sighs, and his voice lowers. "I feel... bad. We didn't have to touch the ones downstairs just because of me."

"Oh, don't. Those are the only kind I like, actually, they're... pretty," Dream insists, and his voice softens. "Because of you."

George studies him for a painful beat, and he says slowly, "I don't understand what that's supposed to mean."

Dream slips his arm down and reaches for his wrist. A slight jump accompanies the wrap of his fingers, and he begins to guide him further down the gallery of softly-lit exhibits. The familiar tank emerges in greeting as they round a bend, wide and littered with a moon jelly swarm, and the tight hold in his chest finally loosens.

Undisturbed glass doubles back a purple veil of their shadows, his head high over George's outline, hands linked at their sides.

"*Aurelia aurita*," George murmurs; dark eyes drift left and don't stray. "What makes these so special?"

"They've been around for millions of years," Dream says, gently gazing back. "A lot longer than I've ever known. They like warmth, and the coasts." His fingertips brush down an open palm, carefully slotting their hands together. "They're sensitive. Every shift in water, change in light, and every touch; they feel. They only hurt you when... when they want to be close, and even then, it is the softest sting in the world."

Echoes of lagoon luminescence drift by their side. Darkness of the open lens hanging from George's neck silently threatens his heart.

"They're you, George," he concludes softly. "They always remind me of you."

*After this, he knows, all of them will.*

"You have..." Their palms tilt up, interlaced fingers closing down over knuckles, and George gives his hand a squeeze. "A complicated relationship with jellyfish."

Dream smiles at him gently. "Relationship?"

"Oh my god."

"Is this a date to you, George?"

"You ruined it," George says. "You were being kind of cute, and then you ruined it. You're so annoying."

"You're—you're the one still holding my hand," Dream forces out, face warming in defense. "That basically means we're married, you know that, right?"

George scoffs tersely. "If we were," he says, swaying closer, "you would've adopted that penguin for us earlier, no questions asked."

"Okay, no. I told you, I'm not willing to *dox* myself—"

"I didn't even tweet the photo."

"—for fake ownership of a *zoo* animal," Dream finishes in a flat tone, interlocked hands caught between their chests. "You're an idiot and I know you. You're going to post it the second we're out of here, and if my name was at all registered somewhere to it's stupid bird tag, some little freak

would scour through the public records and find out—”

“You are the biggest baby,” George says. “It’s a penguin.”

“It’s a liability.”

“It’d be *funny*,” George drawls, knuckles bumping his collarbone pointedly. “You still have a sense of humor, right? Or has all that therapy sucked it out of you?”

Dream laughs sharply. “Oh my god. I’m gonna shut you up when we get home.”

“Is any—” George’s voice breaks in light breaths of amusement. “Anyone looking?”

His eyes swing around the dimly-lit sprawl of the floor, catching backs of heads and an absence of crowds. “Just me,” he reports, face turning back and colliding suddenly with a greeting of lips.

George kisses him softly, tilted on toes, box of the camera barely nudging his ribs. Dream feels himself melting rapidly to savor it, each instance of their lazy-mouthing yesterday springing to the heat of his cheekbones, and George pulls back in a blink.

His pink lips hang a crescent of a moonrise smile, cheeks blue from nearby hues of aqua, and the whites of his teeth disappear behind the rapid return of his mask—all before Dream thinks to breathe.

A burn bubbles through his brain. “What… just....” His fingertips rise, touching his bare jaw in disbelief. “What the hell was that for?”

George laughs gently. “I’m—I’m having a good day.”

“Holy shit,” Dream breathes, and his laughter grows warmer. “Holy shit, you’re dumb, can I—can I kiss you back?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on.” A stunned, unreasonably fond giggle rises from the pit of his stomach. “Can I at least see your smile, again?”

“Nope.” George’s hands slip from his hold and clutch the camera’s controls, tipping towards the glassy reflection of jellyfish. “How about this—”

*Click.*

“Do you wanna get out of here instead?” George offers, and before the question has fully slipped past the fabric of his mask, Dream is answering, “Yes, please.”

-

Fingertips tap in light skitters over the curve of George’s shoulders to the tune of fumbling keys, soft grumbles, teasing laughter, and a breach of the heavy door has Dream’s arms slipping around his waist two steps past the bang behind them. Feet stagger forward across the sunlit foyer, he buries his face into George’s neck, and a light elbow thumps back against the hum vibrating in his ribs.

“You’re gonna—make me—*fall*,” George complains; his middle is squeezed tighter, and a breath leaks from him in a gentle sag backwards.

“So *fall*,” Dream mumbles, lips pressed to the crook of his shoulder. “You can nap here, if you want.”

Warm palms cover his wrists and cling lightly. “What, on the hardwood?”

“Hell yeah.”

He feels George’s scoff shift through his frame, and he grins, forearms wrapping over his chest and pulling him in closer. Dark bristles of hair flatten against his collarbones with a performative sigh. Late afternoon shades the walls in a cast of high yellows, deep oranges; faded hues of pink they’d witnessed crawling from the horizon on their drive home. The glow saturates from the tips of Dream’s eyelashes and fingers, to the firm press of his lips sinking against George’s cheekbone.

“*Ugh*. You’re seriously—” George’s face tips back; lips land on the center of his cheek. “An idiot.”

“Don’t sound so happy when I’m kissing you, then,” Dream combats, and he kisses his temple, between his eyebrows, down the bridge and scrunch and tip of his nose, the lines as he laughs and the curve of his chin before finally retreating. “You can’t blame me. I was missing you all day.”

“You were *with* me all day.”

“I couldn’t *see* you,” he implores gently. “It sucks when you wear a mask.”

“I thought it was kind of nice,” George says, swaying in his grasp to urge them down the hall. “Finally held a conversation without you being distracted by my mouth.”

“Distracted...” Dream’s voice wanders with his steps, avoiding ankles, and his eyebrows raise. “...by *your* mouth.”

Low shoulders bump against his chest. “Quit daydreaming.”

Dream’s face warms into a smile, and he dips his nose to nudge soft hair. “Don’t need to.”

They slow to a stall under the illuminated stretch of an open archway as George turns in his arms. Tempered air locks in his throat, the simple warmth of George held close permeating his body, hands brushing over skin and sleeves, until fingers fold in a light grasp between their chests. Dream’s heartbeat pushes against his knuckles unashamedly fast, and his eyes grow heavy at the sight of George’s gentle smile.

“I’m not taking back what I said in the car.” George’s voice droops in low saccharine; gaze a liquid brown. “Aquariums make me tired.”

“You’re actually going to sleep?” he murmurs.

“I’m actually going to sleep,” George answers.

“This is the worst news I’ve ever heard,” he says. “The sun set literally one second ago, George.”

His forehead rests against cloth collarbones. “Are you aware of what time we fell asleep last night?”

“I am not apologizing for that,” Dream says vehemently. “It was *unbelievable*.” Puffs of laughter grace his neck; his chest blooms, and blooms, and blooms. He missed the dizziness of this unbridled touch more than he thought he would.

“Unbelievable,” George repeats in agreement, and the word is tinted with whispered gossip from their hysterics of 3 A.M.—mounds of covers, saving screenshots, laughing around unintelligible plans to mock their best friend all wrapped in one, breathless phrase—it’s *unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable*.

Dream’s fingers tighten on the fabric of his lower back helplessly. “See? What am I supposed to do while you pass out for, like, eighteen hours?”

“Read a book, maybe.”

“George.”

“You’re in your clingy arc,” George complains, head tilting up. “I never said you couldn’t lie down with me.” Dream pulls back slowly and meets his eyes; he offers up a shrug. “I sleep better when you’re around anyway. Why... what are you—*Dream*—”

His forearm hooks behind George’s knees, lifting him off the wood and into the swing of his arms before the breath filling his chest can break. Strain skitters through his muscles, yet the tense frame and forearms grappled sporadically over his shoulders are light—lighter than he’d expected—and George stares back with a tinge of shock on the edges of his eyes.

Dream blinks down. “I guess I’m... carrying you.”

“You guess?” George breathes.

“I didn’t really—think.” He shifts the weight on his wrists carefully. “Just got happy, you—you’re the one who made it so easy, Jesus, do you wanna get down?”

George relaxes slightly, forearms brushing in a slide along his neck until his braided fingers rest over the knobs on his spine. “This is awesome,” he says. “Take me up the stairs.”

His breathy chuckle jostles George’s side and he walks them forward. “How ‘bout the couch?”

“Fine,” George mumbles. “Pick me up and don’t even put the work in—”

His arms loosen briefly. “I’ll drop you.”

“*Don’t*.” Hands grasp tighter in a reflexive pin against his shoulder. “Oh my god. My heart just doubled.”

“Aw.” They breach a living room of sunset skies, colors crystalized in wide window panes, and his eyes drop down to a prettier brown. “You can just admit you have a crush on me, George. It’s fine.”

“What are we, twelve?”

“PG-13, at least,” Dream corrects, shins bumping the sectional. “Don’t give me that look, I’m right. Yesterday, you were practically *begging* me to make out with you right here—”

“Now you’re just making things up.” George tips his face back, languidly stretching pale muscles on his neck. “I’d never do that.”

“Oh yeah?”

His head snaps forward as Dream begins to laugh. “Dream, don’t—*don’t*—if I get hurt, I’ll be mad at you.”

Dream rolls his eyes, fingers curling back to even his grasp. “Oh, of course, I wouldn’t want you *mad* at me.” Leather dips beneath his knees as he lowers George down, legs tangling, awareness lost in the breathlessness of his smile. “Here you go, my sweet prince, should I wrap you in a blanket while I’m at it?”

Receding light creeps over the back of the couch, leather turning crimson, crowding the lashed curtain of his gaze as his heart catches up to his hands. A palm tucked under George’s back and the other flattened by dark hair, the inside of his wrist brushes a cheekbone freshly tinting pink. His frame looms over George in a hovering press, sharp knees between thighs, socks brushing calves; exhales tumbling down. He curls his fingers into worn cushions. Hands linger on his neck.

“The...” George’s voice wanders quietly. “The sun is in your eyes.”

His head sinks down blindly, and he graces his lips to George’s mouth. Wildfire curls gently through him. George kisses back, soft and fleeting, and faded wisps of sharp green leaves seep into his inhales.

Dream carefully tears himself away, eyebrows pinched together. “Did you steal mints from my car?”

“...No?”

“You—” His nose dips lower, and he pulls back sharply. “You *did*.”

“You said I could,” George argues.

“I said you *couldn’t*, George. Those are for emergencies only.”

“Is my breath reeking like fries not an emergency?”

He rolls his eyes. “Not to *me*.”

“Oh right, apologies, I forgot who I was talking to.” Fingernails graze his collar line. “You grew up eating cat shit. And frogs. And cheese-whiz—”

“Shut up,” he says, laughs pitching between breaths. “I meant they’re for when I’m headed somewhere important and forgot to brush my teeth, or—or there’s a pretty boy waiting at the airport for me—”

“Good save,” George says.

“*I mean* it.” He spitefully kisses the edge of George’s cheek. “On the off chance you were gonna plant one on me, there’s no way I was risking my breath smelling like—like Sapnap’s awful quesadillas.”

“Oh my god.” A light palm thumps his chest. “You knew. I *knew* you knew. *Why* would you let him feed me those?”

“Cause they’re disgusting,” Dream says warmly.

“*You’re* disgusting.” George’s hand smooths over wrinkled fabric on his upper chest, fingers sliding down the even shifts of Dream’s breath to where ribs and hips press lightly together, then lazily glide back up. “Were you really hoping I’d kiss you?”

“Yeah,” he admits, chest tingling in George’s wake. “Were you?”

George falls quiet beneath him, and heartbeats stagger up to his ears.

“If things had been different,” George murmurs finally, “of course.”

*If you had known, his head churns, long tendrilled arms of a lurking shadow creeping to the couch’s edge, about the visa. If I had been there. If I hadn’t fucked up.*

Cold air skitters on the skin of his ankles, exposed from the nudge of George’s socks, and he tries not to consider the days that slipped them by because of the unknown darkness; the rest that could go too soon.

He wants to say, *We’ll know someday.*

Muscles in Dream’s chest strain as he eases down to blanket George’s body, careful to not squeeze the life force from shoulder blades resting in his palms. Timid fingers respond in a drift into his hair. He sighs into the crook of George’s shoulder, breath rebounding, and the deep cushions let their silence sink until the unspoken fear ebbs away.

*We’re here now.*

George’s nails scratch across his scalp in grazing, idle patterns, coaxing his throat-caught words away. Claws of heat begin to hook slowly inside of his chest on each dragging downstroke, igniting nerves stringing along his spine.

He tilts his face up into the touch, nose and scruff dragging on the skin of George’s neck. The hand in his hair tightens.

His eyelashes snap open. Unsure, he begins to pull the heat of his cheeks away from George’s jaw, and the palm on the back of his head spreads preventatively. Firm fingertips hold his skull and massage in pressing circles, lulling his eyes shut, enticing his mouth to press down on the warm base of George’s neck.

Breath hitches in George’s throat. Dream parts stagnant lips and brushes along the side of it in a restless incline, reaching jawbone, exhaling shallow.

“Dream.” George’s voice blows hot on the top of his hair, and his gut braces for the gentle nudge to stop him before he’s begun. “Don’t ever shave.”

A breathy laugh flees his throat. “Whatever you want, George,” he swears, and an enthused curl of fingers in his hair drops his voice down. “Whatever you want.”

Dream kisses down his neck in a gentle, brazen trail, and George’s abdomen curves up against his pounding ribs. His mouth parts over the rapid pushback of his pulse and draws in light skin.

A sigh spills underneath him.

His jaw sinks deeper. Breaths sink deeper. His hands and hips remember the cold edge of the kitchen counter, faint bloodrush in his ears, relearning why they’ve kept their mouths above chin level every night since. The taste of his spit on George’s throat makes him want to leave red reminders of where his lips have been.

*I think you’d leave bruises.*

His gut surges.

“Can—can you—” He pulls away from George’s throat in a puff. “—breathe okay?”

“No,” George rushes, lips springing into a dazed smile. “Can *you*?”

Dream shakes his head fervently, messy hair flopping across the sheen of his forehead, and startling laughs bubble past George’s teeth. Trembling fingers reach up and brush his hairline back.

*Mercy.* He tips his jaw, letting George glide over his scalp softly, warmth in his gut oozing to his tongue as shared breaths fall even.

“I am,” Dream says, “so happy we’re alone now.”

“Yeah.” George touches his face. “Sapnap can go die.”

He collapses onto his shoulder in a wheeze, restraint cottoned in his joints dissolving in the joytide, laughter flattening George completely.

“Okay—now I—*seriously* can’t breathe,” George forces out in jostles against him. “Off, Dream. Off.”

“Not my fault.” Dream frees the rise and fall of his ribcage in a sideways lean, muttering, “Get better lungs. Plus ratio.”

A wayward hand passes down his spine and pinches lightly. “You already ratioed me once today.”

He hums through a closed-mouth smile. After the deliberated image was tweeted from his passenger seat and ruefully captioned, “*Dream didn’t buy me a penguin*,” he took advantage of a longer red light and replied to George with a simple; “*baby I’ll buy you a zoo*.” Numbers flew by, George brooded from their drive-through meal until the foyer door, and the meandering fingers on Dream’s back somehow seem to spell a slow, twirling, “*L-O-S-E-R*.”

His arms tighten around George. “You’re just mad—” He peppers the side of his neck chastely. “They love me more.”

“Okay.” George’s fingers vanish from his shoulder blades in retreat. “I’m going to sleep.”

“No,” Dream drawls, desperately clinging on as George’s back rotates towards him. “Come back, I’m joking, it’s a joke, I’ll give you a *hundred* times more love than ever they will.”

Forearms squeeze around him, and George sinks. “Fine,” he says. “Only ‘cause you’re warm.”

“Yay.”

George sighs; he mimics it. The sprawl of Dream’s chest curves against his shoulders, arms wrapped in a close hold over his torso and hips kept away from the back of his thighs.

“This is just like after we got breakfast together,” Dream mumbles to his shoulder. George clicks his tongue in gentle response, and he smiles back habitually. “Except now—” His fingers grab George’s jaw. “I can do *this*—”

He crashes his mouth below George’s nose, and a soft giggle complains into the mess. The hasty roots of the kiss tumble away in softening seconds, closed-mouthed and moving slow.

George pulls back gently, hair splayed on the shared cushion pressed beneath their ears, and he gazes at Dream across the green fabric field. His cheeks are pink in the sunset; static frays his

silhouette.

“I wish...” Dream’s eyes pass between dark, dilated pupils. “I could go back in time, and tell my past self this moment was going to happen.”

“I wish I could go back and tell myself you’re real,” George agrees quietly, and he severs their shared bridge in a quick glance up. “But your eyebrows are different than I thought they’d be.”

Dream laughs, scattering the bundled nerves in his body. “My eyebrows?”

“Mhm. They’re darker than I expected.” George lifts a hand and runs his thumb across them. “But little bits still look like your hair.”

The pad of his finger slows and smooths the crease of Dream’s brow. His eyes flutter shut, not trusting himself to speak.

“You always pinch them here,” George says softly; Dream’s breath slips from him in a sag. Touch wanes over his cheek, cheekbone, nose. “Your freckles bunch up when you laugh.” Nails tip in to trickle through his stubble. “This changes you.”

“Are you memorizing my face?” he asks, but his tongue is numb. Cheeks burning, eyelids heavy, his features feel painfully open.

“...It’s hard not to, Clay.” George’s fingers descend and curl in a lull on his neck, knuckles resting against his pulse. “In my dreams you were just... a feeling I had, or a voice I heard. I could never picture you.” His thumb strokes back and forth repeatedly over inches of burning nerves, and his voice nearly disappears. “Sometimes I’d reach out and my hands would go right through.”

Dream gently reaches for his palm. Fingers shift, dancing gently in familiar motions until their hands twine together between them.

“You were my ghost,” George whispers.

“I wasn’t a ghost, George.” His eyebrows draw together, searching his face delicately. “I’m real.”

“Now you’re real,” he corrects as Dream carefully lifts their linked knuckles.

He presses lingering lips to each sharp juncture on George’s hands and says softly, “I’m still yours.”

George leans in and kisses him. Sounds of a silent rooftop night rush to sit in his ears, red pulse in his chest blinking in and out, body lighting up in an electric grid of nerves as George’s jaw pushes, opens, he kisses, hands squeeze, and George clutches back tighter. Spearmint touches his tongue.

Noses bump and inhales clip until wet lips drop away.

“I—” George’s breath hits his chin. “I thought about you so much.”

His lips surge to reconnect, shoulder tilting over a sprawl of fabric and ribs. A denim-clad knee slides between two he’s bumped during table dinners, pinched to distract from screens, squeezed on a stuffy car ride and dreamt of drifting hands between.

Their foreheads rest together, breath beating back.

“All the time,” George says faintly.

“All the time,” Dream agrees in an exhale. “All the fucking time.”

George’s thighs squeeze around him. His head drops sharply to his neck, and kisses run in a smear across hot skin.

“I’d go to sleep hoping—” George’s voice strains, throat curling up against him. “Hoping I’d see you.”

Interlocked knuckles pin to the cool leather above their heads. “Fuck, please keep talking. Please.”

“I’d wake up missing you.”

His hips and teeth graze down; George’s breath picks up.

“Called every—morning and—your *voice*. Made me feel warm. So warm. So, so—” A low tremor hitches George’s exhale. “*Special*.”

“You *are*,” Dream pants against his jaw. “You were, I never—never picked up for anyone else, George. I liked having—” Realization cauterizes through him and burns into his voice. “Having you all to myself.”

George’s fingers grow lax in his grip, body melting into cushions as all traces of rigidity flee through his exhale. The momentary lapse leaves Dream with palms full of pliable muscle, and he feels his blood pulse, clutching in strained disbelief. Slowly, his hand slips from George’s hold and touches to his jaw.

Thumb on his cheek, Dream lowers his mouth to hover by his ear, and he tests, “That’s all I wanted. You.” Ribs expand in a deep inhale below him. “I was so fucking stupid for not seeing it sooner.” The heel of his palm drags down George’s abdomen; thighs fall away from the sides of his own. “You’re everything. You’re perfect. I need you.”

A breathless sound slips by in the shape of his name.

Iron fingers burn into George’s hip. “Say it back,” Dream pleads. “You need me, too.”

“I need you, too.” George grasps his wrist and pulls a stubborn palm. “I need you.” His hips rise into Dream’s touch. “*I need you*.”

A sharp vibration skitters through the fabric of his sweats. Dream’s fingers jerk back in a flinch, and brittle air is punctured by the prolonged, spiking ring.

“Shit.” George’s fingertips dive to uncage the rattling phone from his pocket. “I—I should—”

“George,” he says, “*ignore* it.”

A click plunges them into silence and the device is thrown across a cushioned wasteland. George’s hand returns to cup his face in a rushing kiss, until the ringing chirps out again.

George pulls back, eyes cutting towards the hum of leather hyde. “Dream—” Lips land on his chin; he pushes Dream’s mouth away. “What if—what if it’s my mum?”

His hands lock and head tips up. Wide, dark eyes snap back in a scrape across his face, beginning a split from his lips and down to the open vault of his stomach.

*Accepted.*

The untouched call rattles on.

*Denied.*

“I have to check,” George says evenly, face drawn into a thinly mouthed, tight cheeked composure. The last scramble of minutes only remains in the sheen on his throat, rumple of his clothes; battered rise and fall of his chest.

*Accepted, denied.* Dream leans off of him shakily. *Accepted.* His eyes are pinned to every stretching inch of George’s hands, phone recollected, gut dropping low, daydream edging on nightmare with one shadowed swoop. *Accepted, accepted, accepted.*

George snorts, phone slipping from his hand as he liquifies back into the couch.

“What—what happened? Who called?”

He gives Dream an amused look. “Who do you think?”

His chest deflates in relief. “Oh my god.” Tugged back down towards a lure of grinning lips, his body stalls halfway. “Wait, did he—he called you twice?”

“Yeah?”

Dream leans back and tugs his bulky phone from the depths of his pants, awkwardly adjusting a pressing inseam in the crossfire, and George huffs at him. He shushes back as his eyes fall to the screen.

*Nickypoo — Missed call (2)*

He looks up, and George groans lightly.

“There’s like, an eighty-five percent chance this is something serious,” Dream apologizes.

George flops back to the cushions. “Or is it a hundred percent serious, but only covers eighty-five percent of phone calls?”

He gives George’s knee a fond squeeze, redialing the number, and the line passes through.

“Finally,” Sapnap says. “You’re fucking impossible.”

Dream leans back against propped up pillows, clearing the low rasp from his lungs. “Is this an emergency?”

“Yes. Sort of, I mean, but not for me. I don’t have a ton of time to explain, Karl and I—” Screeching tires peel through the chatter behind Sapnap’s voice, and Dream tips the phone away from his ear with a wince as he hears him call, “Jesus, slow the fuck down.”

“What the hell was that?”

“Go-karts. Forget about it. Listen, Karl was streaming like an hour ago, Dream, and I was helping him read off...”

He hears a faint giggle from nearby, and his eyes snap down. George mocks his dramatic grimace at the noisy reception, he smiles, George smiles, warm couch cushions slide down his back and his head buzzes with rattled thoughts of what the call could’ve been; what they could’ve gained from telephone-wired seconds or lost in a nettled sting.

Words whiz by his ear without importance, and he gives George's thigh a firm, lingering squeeze.

George raises his eyebrows. He raises his back.

"...Went to check..." Gaps slip through Sapnap's words as George leans closer. "—don't know how, but it's getting a lot of traction—"

A hand slides in a wagered advancement up his chest, and Dream's fingers drift up to the dip of thigh muscle meeting hip bone. The warm underside of George's leg slings across his lap.

His breath thins to wisps. He tightens his grip on the screen's edge, halfway zoning back.

"—with what George posted," Sapnap is saying, "I wasn't sure if you guys knew already or not, so I figured I'd call."

"Uh-huh," Dream replies breathlessly, watching each razored second of George slowly sliding an arm over his shoulders, a familiar grin plastered on his lips.

*Oh, god.*

"Dream, are you listening?"

George's head dips under his jaw, and lips settle gently on his throat; a soft kiss, pulling away, feathering down again. *Oh.* Trembling fingers thread through dark vanes of hair. *God.*

"Yes," Dream forces out in a lie, and a warm tongue glides up to his cheekbone.

A sharp exhale drops from his nose and his hand grips, pulls; strains in recovery. The wet stripe cools on his neck, and his body warms into awareness that he'd tugged George onto his lap, palm curved against his spine and nails sunk deep.

"Oh," George breathes.

His face floods, hearing the twinge of a missed joke hang heavily; George meant to gross him out by adding an extremity to their standoff, and ended up on top of Dream's thighs, mouth pressed to his cheek with little room to breathe.

Dream's grip hastily relaxes, and he forces out, "Hold on, Sap, let me just—" He clears his throat, thumbs fumbling across the screen, eyelashes tipping up wide as George's head lowers again. "Put you... on speaker, just one..."

A warm, open kiss blooms in a sting below his ear.

He murders the static hum of the call in a sharp click, phone dropping to spring off neglected cushions.

"He's—" George laughs with lips against his throat. "He's gonna kill you."

His jaw tips. "Let him."

"What'd he say?" George murmurs, mouth lazily exploring skin and stubble.

"Don't know."

"Was it important?"

“Don’t care,” he breathes. Receding sunbeams shred across the ceiling shadows overhead, whites and oranges blurring in a hazey tinge above his lidded eyes, and his hands float, fingertips rippling a cotton surface, back to the boxy sides of George’s hips. “I just—want you.”

His fingers curl in over flesh and bone. George sags down against warm denim.

“Jesus, you...” Dream’s voice scrapes in his throat as breaths layer on his shoulder. “...really like my hands this much?”

A nod bumps his collarbone.

Thumbs drift under the hem of George’s t-shirt, and he traces shaky circles on his warm abdomen. Dream slowly sprawls his palms across his stomach, fingertips touching from ribs to waistband, and he swallows. Hands wrap over his wrists, and his gaze staggers down to revel in the fabric folds, straining lines, thighs on his.

“They were all I had of you,” George says, trailing over knuckles and veins and knuckles again. “For years.”

Dream’s chest aches. Softly, he repeats, “For years, George?”

“Yeah,” he whispers barely.

Dream nudges his cheek with his own, hands spreading down his thighs. “I’m so sorry. Let me make it up to you.”

“Dream.”

“Is that what you want? My hands, here?”

“*Dream.*”

“Words, George. I’ll do anything. Tell me. *Anything.*”

George meets his eyes, breathes when he breathes, and pleads, “Just have me.”

Dream kisses deeply into him.

Hands and exhales dissolve their throats in a tide of wordlessness, flooding Dream’s head with remnants of a daydream, half-real memories of George in moonlight; George, his moonlight, likes warm licks on his throat and fingers pressed to the shell of his hips, or squeezing the muscle of his thighs. He likes kisses on his collarbones, inside of lean biceps, on the wrists clasped over Dream’s neck as his mouth hunts any exposed skin. He likes when Dream’s thighs shift below him; his eyelashes float in a dipping daze when he roots him down. He’s softer than Dream expected or would have ever known, any place of sharp edges, he prefers light touches, gentle lips; firm palms over fingernails.

Dream loses himself in learning. The white hot warmth of his admiration can shine and slow, appreciate George, take time to study the skin of his back beneath a sprawling palm, memorize the shudder of his thighs as he touches him through fabric. Billows of his own breath leave him in unsteady gusts, lap trapped in a tortured stasis underneath George’s hips. Palms over his boxers, wrist burning his waistband, hasty motions and loving words bring George to nonsense against his ear.

The only instance George tilts sharp is to pull Dream’s face against his neck, fingers tugging in his

hair, tight enough to draw low curses from his parted lips.

He's warned in a broken melody, words of "won't" and "last" and "long," and everything in him sears soft kisses to George's throat, time suspended, silence suspended, and he breathes back a wayward, "*In your underwear. For me.*"

Sweat lines down Dream's sternum, and every incorrigible beat of his heart pushes through his bloodstream, flush on his cheeks, nose, chest. He holds George close and kisses him, over and over and over again until lips stall and inhales recalibrate to even swells. His palms burn. His stomach burns.

His arms bar in soothing drags across George's lower back. A forehead rests on his collarbone, still, and slow, ringing pants blanket their shoulders.

Words gather in his throat, saturate towards his unmoving tongue, and he finally murmurs, "George?" A gentle hum vibrates against his forearms in response. "This wasn't... too fast, was it?"

"Fuck no," George breathes, and Dream's eyes flutter shut.

*I can still hear you. Your sounds. Your whines. My name, my name, begging for me to—*

"Do you, um—" A swallowed shift clicks quietly in George's throat, fingertips touching down on his fast-beating, fever hot chest. "Do you want me to..."

The palm on his chest shakes lightly as it flattens against his shirt; weak, and unsteady, and candidly unsure.

"Oh," Dream forces out in a soft exhale. "N—no, it's okay. I'm okay. That was just for you."

George slowly buries his face in his neck. "Are you sure?" he mumbles.

"I'm very sure."

He feels George's huff on the curve of his shoulder. Chilled hues of dusk drift beyond the sprawl of living room windows, and his forearms gently brush along George's spine, wind gone from his ribs.

Pulling back slowly, George's eyes find him. His face is flushed and beautiful.

"Is it alright if I go shower?" he asks quietly.

A gentle smile crosses his features. "Depends," Dream says, easing him off his lap. "Is it alright if I think about you?"

George laughs sharply. "It's a serious question, Dream."

"So was mine."

"As if you've ever asked for permission before."

"I'm asking now," he says sweetly.

George grins back, a little crooked in the tip of his jaw, and he leans in as Dream's eyes slip down. Two, warm fingertips touch his bottom lip, he exhales against them before they drop away. Seconds later, they skim over the half-unzipped press in his pants, and his stomach tightens.

“Yes,” George mutters, “you can.”

“Jesus,” Dream breathes, “Christ.”

George is leaving the couch before Dream can attempt to hook arms around his waist and reel him in, swimming in the sound of his receding laughter, and he casts eyes to the high ceiling once he's gone away. Cheeks warm, heart on fire, his head churns uselessly until he hears the faint spill of a shower stream dripping from above, and his gaze drops down.

A tissue box sits on the coffee table—the same daunting construction of cardboard George used after crying in his arms two nights ago.

He sighs raggedly.

*Whatever works, I guess.*

Later in the evening, early in the night, George is out cold on his bed upstairs and he's trekking back from the kitchen with a plate of apples and smeared peanut butter in hand. By a dazed off chance, outside glow glints off the back of his phone case forgotten on the cat-haired carpet.

He balances the plate, side-eyes the box with ducks and flowers dotting down the edges, and retrieves his screen to a faceful of messages.

All from Sapnap; all in an unanswered text chain with him and George.

**(7:51 PM) Check your fucking phones**

**(7:52 PM) [Attachment: Link]**

**(7:52 PM) [Attachment: Link]**

**(7:52 PM) [Attachment: Link]**

**(7:52 PM) [Attachment: Link]**

Eyes widening from a dim squint, Dream clicks on the first message, and a Twitter thread expands across his screen. High numbers, descending replies, the four-part story ends with an image attached at the bottom.

“Oh,” he breathes to the reflection on his phone. “Fuck.”

## Chapter End Notes

hello HELLO. thank you all for your patience and for reading, I'm nervous but excited for this chapter and am looking forward to seeing what you think, ik it's different from the usual for many reasons, and I hope the changes are easy to get used to!! there was so much that went into this one, I thought I wouldn't want it to be too long, but as I was writing I found I wanted to spend time with the characters (and let the dummies spend time with each other). in particular I wanted these scenes to feel really close to Dream's character and his heart, also the fluff. jeez. thanks for bearing with me.

BIG love to zach, and thanks for the title name. I'm gonna rest, then rally, then

continue so I'll see you when I see you!!! I appreciate everything you guys say and think and feel while coming along in this story with me :) I notice and love you all. <3

# Daydream

## Chapter Summary

In light of recent stressors, Dream and George enjoy a lazy day indoors.

## Chapter Notes

// This chapter contains implied sexual content and mature themes.

Welcome back. Long update. Since it's been a while, I'd suggest skimming the end bit of ch.5 as a refresher for a couple of things mentioned in this one. Take your time and I hope you enjoy reading. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A canopy of webbing black looms over Dream's spine, branches punched through by deep purple sky. His eyes cross in wild snaps from trunks to shadows, thickets to soil, and back to the sparse holes overhead. Yellow-green specks of light fade in and out of existence in the faraway atmosphere, and he reaches shaky fingers towards the fireflies.

Leaves curl in an open caress against his face. Waxy blades brush his rough jaw, grazing bare skin —and his outstretched palm plummets to his cheekbone.

*Bare.*

He stumbles back. Twigs scrape through his hair. Drumming blood heats the flesh of his face, and exhales pour into his hands.

*Maskless.*

Foliage churns beneath the soles of his shoes as his heels brace the dirt. His weight shifts towards his toes.

*Run.*

A sharp yank tears him back by the fabric of his hood, and his shoulder blades slam into solid warmth. Dream coughs raggedly, neckline burning, and he swings back his elbow in a blind collision.

Cold steel slots underneath his jaw. His chin tips; his lungs seize. He grips the forearm pinning across his chest and claws at leather-wrapped skin. Similar hyde snarls up his own wrists, worn and bloodstained, resemblance barely visible without the glint of the moon.

Words of another world ring between his ears.

*"Have you ever tried speaking to him?"*

Blade threatens to bite flesh. His lips split open in a ragged inhale.

*No, no, no.*

*“All he knows is violence.”*

A head hangs low by his ear. He strains to catch a steady glimpse of the assailant, and a rounded profile protrudes where features should be—unfeeling, protected, *masked*. Dream remembers standing on the soft-sanded shore and calling to the woods, voice echoing; the shadowed silhouette mirroring every motion towards freeing his unknown face.

“You—” Vibrations stinging on the edge of the axe, Dream spits, “—*lied*.”

The hold trapping Dream’s shoulders tightens, sharpness pressing against his jaw and forcing his head to turn. Exhales tumble from his nose and fog the clean, polished weaponry as he bores into the suffocating woods. Leaves begin to shiver, wooden limbs snapping through the silence, and a rip slowly forms to a view of sand and sea.

Dream’s stomach seizes, and he pulls on the unbudging forearm as his breath shallows in hot puffs. The gap yearns wider until the promise of a gentle hellscape is all his eyes can see—lagoon, tide, darkness—*run*.

“*Look*,” the masked double rasps, and his words sound like the wind. “*Someone is in the water.*”

The axe drops from Dream’s throat, and he lurches forward in a frantic heave. Rocks and mud spit up from snarled roots beneath his shoes as he runs, and runs, and runs—the furious burn in his lungs fueling the push of thighs over knees, calves over ankles through the dark underbrush. His ears catch a whisper of the lapping shore.

Trees bend and break around him until his feet carry onto sand, shoving down white mounds, and a sky of fireflies yawns freely over his head. Wind touches his face. He loses ground at the water’s edge, and his eyes cut back.

The forest is gone from him. Barred only by the ring of sand preserving the lagoon, water is everywhere, stretching out on all sides into an infinite horizon of ocean and blending sky.

A crawl shivers across his upper back.

*Look.*

His wired shoulders lower away from his neck, and he turns to face forward.

*Someone, someone.*

Far across the murky surface, deep in the heart of the water, a purple glow sinks down.

*Someone.*

The teeth of his boot smack into inch-deep water, and a blue bloom skitters through the droplets. His heart is soundless, flat waves cease to crash, he breathes and cannot hear the air pass in his throat. Illuminated splashes drive him further and further, warm liquid rising to his knees, and the purple presence rapidly diminishes.

Dream dives in. Saltwater slips over his hair and pools in his ears, eyes shut, breath locked, scooping palms and strong kicks guiding him further into his plunge. Floating purple light

encroaches beyond his eyelids, and he peels wet lashes apart.

A chorus of reds and blues pour into his open pupils, sprawled out in a sudden explosion surrounding his chest. Jellyfish drift in the lights. He wonders up at the ascending, bioluminescent bubbles; blackness looms below his suspended feet as water, salt, lagoon-made tar gently floods his gaping lungs.

Slices of moonlight strike the surface swaying far above his floating hair. Beams burn his limbs, and he curls inward, knees tucking against his chest. His forearm crawls over his face.

Rippling down from leagues above, a half-remembered voice shouts, “*Look!*”

His ribs ache, and his eyes lull shut.

-

A gutting gasp slices through Dream’s throat.

His abdomen folds in an upward heave and elbows hit his knees, covered in white sand—*sheets, blankets, real*—and his inhales rattle violently.

“Dream? Dream—hey, hey, you’re awake. You’re awake.”

George’s fingers touch his upper back and his muscles skitter in a sharp flinch. His trembling palms shove into his eyes, images burning, memories afire.

“Some—someone was—” His heavy breaths nudge the curve of George’s hand as it carefully lowers to his shoulder again. “*Drowning*. They were—drowning, they needed—*help*—”

“You’re okay, you’re okay. It’s okay.” George brushes a palm up and down Dream’s spine, slow and firm. “We’re right here in your bed, okay? This is real, Clay. *This* is real.”

Dream’s hands slide away from his eyes, breaths spacing out. Fabric covering tight muscles on his back grows warm under George’s repeated path, and his mind wanders through it devotedly.

“Why was somebody in the water?” he breathes, and George pulls him in closer. “Why the fuck was I back in the water?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fuck—what the *fuck*.” His face hits George’s collarbone. “I thought they were gone. I just want them to be gone.”

“I know,” George whispers. “I know.”

His arm crawls across George’s waist and squeezes tight. George holds the side of his aching head, and his eyes slowly adjust to the poorly lit room. Muted grays slip through the curtains and blinds, and the shapes of his familiar furniture become less fuzzy with each grounding inhale.

Limbs pressing warm to his own and back half-propared by pillows, the outline of George grows crisp, too. Bleary eyes gaze down at him, a puffy face lined by a slight frown; Dream’s forearm relaxes over his middle at the sight of him.

“I... I can’t go back to sleep again,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“If you’re up, I’m up,” George dismisses in a murmur. His thumb brushes Dream’s cheek. “Want

to talk about it?"

"No."

"Want the time?"

"...Yes, please."

George's hand abandons the safe press against his face, and Dream watches the folds on his t-shirt shift as he stretches towards his face-down phone. The screen is pulled back towards their eyes, glowing gently.

6:07 AM.

Idle texts from Sapnap in their iMessage group chat sit below the stark numbers, ending in brisk words of "good plan" and "sleep well," and Dream lets out a stinging sigh.

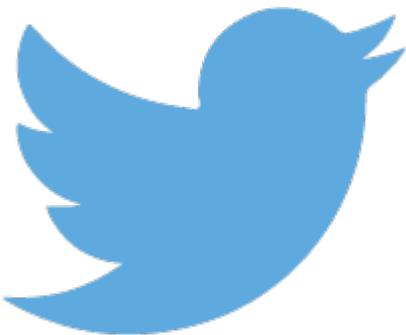
"Can you check if it's still there?" he asks quietly.

"...Are you sure?"

Dream nods in a shift against cloth, and the phone opens under George's fingers. He scrolls past a long, bubbled exchange of grays and blues until reaching the thread, and the Tweets descend from the top of the screen.



goose



@this-isnt-real

this stupid couple at the florida aquarium won't get out of my photos ☺ i came here for penguins

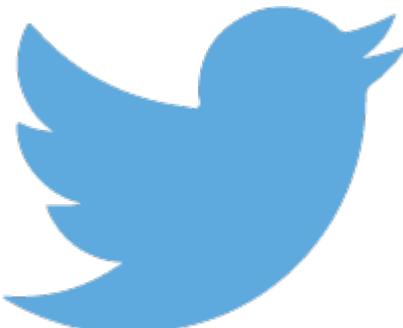


not PDA 2:14 PM - 17 September 2020 3.3K  
80.8K

10.4K



goose



@this-isnt-real

holding hands n shit they're kind of cute i miss my ex 2:15 PM - 17 September 2020 989



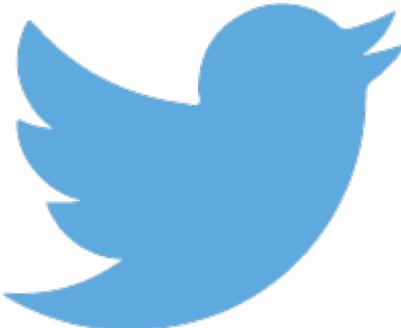
3.1K



35.7K



goose



@this-isnt-real

what the hell is a DNF 4:43 PM - 17 September 2020 4.8K



5.8K



68.8K

*This Tweet has been deleted.*

“The photo is down,” George breathes.

Dream’s eyes fall shut, but the phantom weight of his phone screen tingles in his palm. Underneath a confused caption about posting for “proof,” and a possible promise to remove it in the face of heavy traction, the image is stored in his retinas despite its late deletion:

Frozen on the edge of a wider shot, broad daylight leaned down on the side of Dream’s face as his free smile beamed at George, masked, tilted towards him with fingers pressed into his sternum. Neither of them remember the moment exactly, or Dream’s hand wrapped tight over his wrist and knuckles, or the bump of knees against thighs and black camera sandwiched between them.

Too close to mean nothing; not close enough to mean *something*. A wall of glass held sun soaked penguins and deep, green water behind them. He remembers the humid, saltwater air.

*Humid, saltwater lagoon.*

“Dream.” George’s firm voice interrupts his spitfire of thoughts. “This is good.”

“You know they saved screenshots of it,” he mutters. “Look at the replies.”

“Half of them agree it’s just speculation. This still doesn’t prove anything.”

A tsk blows from the edge of his mouth. The repeated band-aid of a resolution is feeble, he knows it, George knows it: the time stamps, numerous interactions, and strange coincidences support the opposing end effortlessly.

“They’re going to see what I look like someday.” Dream curls his fingernails into his palm and imagines the bite of leather. “When that happens, they’ll know.” George takes his hand; his voice softens. “They’ll know.”

Pillow mounds and tousled comforters hold the silent bank of what they haven’t tried to speak about, what he can’t figure out how to say:

*They’ll know me, know this, know us.*

His head lowers back to rest against George’s sternum, and he listens to the gentle thump of his heart. George touched his chest when he told him; after hurrying up the stairs, quietly shutting the bedroom door, shaking George’s shoulder and displaying the photograph to his tired eyes, George pressed fingers over his heart and asked, “*How bad is it?*”

No anger, no panic, nothing except slow blinks, warm hands and a patient stare begging, “*where, where, where are you?*”

He holds George tighter. George sighs back, sinking them both deeper against the mattress.

“Waiting it out clearly isn’t helping you,” he murmurs. “What do you want to do now?”

Dream’s eyebrows draw together. “I don’t know.” To the dark threads on George’s shirt, he admits, “I don’t know if… I want them knowing me, George. At least not until the visa gets approved.”

He feels George’s lungs halt underneath his ear.

*If, he waits to hear. If it gets, if we will, if if if—*

“Okay,” George says.

His eyes scrape up, and George’s are closed. Heartbeats pound in his chest and against the side of his head. Carefully, Dream squeezes his vision into darkness again, dropping gold dews of hope into a familiar well.

George clears his throat, and the vibrations ripple against the edge of his stony voice. “They shouldn’t know about us, then,” he says, “before we even know what this is.”

*I know what this is.*

“Okay,” Dream says softly.

The phone powers down in a quiet click, and George’s palm returns to wrap over the back of his neck. Fingers brush skin the axe threatened to bleed.

*I know. I know. I know.*

“What do *you* think we should do?” Dream asks, voice barely audible as the wide, waterless basin of his chest yearns, wishes and sinks in the coming tide water.

“I guess... a stream could distract them.” Nails trickle through his hair. “If Twitter comes up, we’ll ignore it.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Well,” George says. “Can you lie?”

—

“Min—mindere, thank you for the dono, ‘*why didn’t Dream buy you a penguin?*’” George reads from the screen, and he scoffs. “Because he hates me, that’s why.”

“That is a *lie*, you’re lying, stop—stop hogging the keys.” Dream elbows him away from the glowing keyboard, and he adjusts his awkward reach from the spare seat they’d dragged in. “Guys, anything we say on this stream is a lie, hit the sub button right now if you want to hear the—oh. George is—” His fingers fly to mute the mic as he watches George stand. “Where’ya going?”

“Food.” George glances at the loaded Minecraft chunks and messy, half-grieved builds on the SMP stretching across curving monitors. OBS runs on absently; he glances back. “Go on. Sell out for me.”

Dream smiles and unmutes. “George is taking a potty break,” he says fondly, catching George’s eye-roll as he disappears through the doorway. “Everyone use their primes, sub for free, you might not think you have it but you probably do...”

Purples go in stride, and he repeats usernames and scans messages before they roll out of reach. Viewer numbers tip and go, but the hoard of watchers, presence of thousands beneath the title “*building Dream a house*,” forces his fingers to rub the back of his neck. He spares a glance at the empty hallway.

*It's easier when you're here.*

Running aimlessly over grass blocks, hitting Callahan left-handedly into a nearby pool of water, Dream switches to George’s chair—*his* chair—and pulls the mouse to the other side. Donations slip by.

“*Turn facecam on?*” He laughs. “No, fuck you guys. ‘*When did Sapnap leave*,’ uh, days ago. Three days ago.” Feedback of his flattening voice rings slightly, crowding his head like the airport bustle, clicking windshield wipers; flooding nightmare water. He yawns, and the noises disappear in a pop. “Again about the penguin, you guys are obsessed today. Fine, you know what? Here—here’s why we didn’t adopt one.”

Floorboards creak in the hall.

*Lie.*

They’d made it this far into the stream without a word of the photo, the scruff on his face, glint of teeth in his smile, George peering up at him amidst a carefree argument forever held in place. Underneath the belly of anxiety latent in his chest, part of Dream *enjoys* the picture, wants to keep it, revels in the idea of someone thinking George is his without a second thought.

*Lie once, and then it's over.*

“The penguin was really cute, don’t get me wrong—”

George slowly leans against the doorframe, gazing at him, silver spoon resting on the edge of his bowl in hand.

*Come up with something. Something. Something.*

“—I just didn’t want to risk getting doxxed over it,” Dream confesses to the mic, eyes pulling back to the screen. A blocky, pixelated reindeer skin stares back. “I even made George wait a couple days before tweeting about it, so, you guys are lucky you knew at all.”

His mouth tastes like sand, but George shifts in the edge of his vision, and a hand squeezes his shoulder. The touch guides his head away from his heart in seconds.

“Plus.” Dream clears his throat. “I wouldn’t want to split custody of the little guy between here and England, I mean, that’s just cruel. I’d want my partner—co-parent—to be here with me.”

George’s spoon clunks on the edge of the bowl. The lagging chat speed doubles, then triples, piping out in relentless tandem, “*partner! partner! partner!*”

“Oh my god.” His cheeks grow hot. “Shut up, chat, you guys are the dumbest—it was a *hypothetical*. None—none of you passed English class, right, let me spell it out—”

He types and spams, “*H-Y-P-O-T-H-E-T-I-C-A-L*.” George huffs from his left, irritability laced with green-flagged amusement, and he leans back into the mesh of his chair.

““Hypothetically in love?”” A smile twitches on his lips, and his eyes narrow. “Who said that? Ban them. Actually, ban anyone who says—”

“Okay, no, give me back my stream.” George tugs on the arm of the chair and rotates him away from the controls; he doesn’t budge. “Dream.”

He glances off the hanging microphone to stare up at George, and he teases quietly, “It’s my chair.”

George’s eyebrows perk. “It’s my channel.”

“Who’s fault is that?”

“*What?*” George drops his face to inches in front of Dream’s own, whispering, “We’d be doing this from yours if you didn’t whine so much about—”

Dream inclines his chin. “You *like* when I whine.”

“They could’ve heard that.” A smile fights onto George’s face. “What is wrong with you?”

“You’re my soulmate.”

“Dream, move.”

“Make me.”

George’s eyes brighten with his voice. “You’re an idiot.”

“Did I ask?” Dream questions loudly, and George drops into his lap.

Cereal crisps crunch with the movement of George’s jaw, metal clinking against the scoop of the bowl. George turns them to face the monitors, heels bumping his shins, and Dream grasps the armrests. His thighs are warm. The world is warm. Dream tries to clear the hitch in his throat until memories of George on his lap the night before swarm him, become of him, and—*Jesus, fuck, his ass is warm.*

“Hello, chat,” George chirps.

“George.” Dream’s whisper lands carefully, breath aimed at the shoulder blades suddenly inches from his chest. “This is going to be really awkward in a second if you don’t get off of me.”

“What were we doing last with Dream’s house?” George continues, and he passes his bowl over his shoulder. “The roof? M’kay.”

Dream reluctantly takes the dish, ceramic cold enough to hiss against his palm. “*George*,” he repeats helplessly.

The corner of George’s mouth quirks. “Whine all you want,” he mutters, “don’t let it get soggy.”

Holding the bowl in a cupped palm, Dream silently stabs George’s back with the blunt end of the spoon and shovels a mouthful of cereal. Awful and far too sweet, tugged from a gas station shelf sometime their past blur of a week and a half, he eats ruefully and bores eyes into the screen over George’s shoulder.

Blocks stack. George hums, talks to their invisible audience and friends in the game-chat, laughing on jostling occasion; Dream chews and chews and chews.

George briefly mutes the microphone. “You sound like a horse.”

“Fuck you and your cocoa puffs.” Dream leans forward to set the depressing remnants of beige-colored milk on the desk, and his core presses flush to George’s back.

Rigidity homesteads in the body before him.

Another donation chimes through the speakers; Dream begins to lean away.

“Um, ‘*where is Dream?*’ Sorry, missed the name, but thank you,” George reads and tilts back into his retreating collarbones. “And I don’t know, Dream, where are you?”

Heart beating keen on warm shoulder blades, he projects weakly, “Here.” An elbow nudges his ribs. “*Here*, hi, I’m here.”

George tsks. “Sorry guys. He’s being quiet today.”

Dream slides arms across his waist. “I’m not.”

“Chat says you are.”

“Chat is gonna die.”

“In game,” George adds, breath scattering as fingers jab his ribs. “You can’t keep *bullying* the stream—and me—stop, you’re so—” Dream gives his side a deep squeeze, and sharp reflexes jostle George in a bounce against his lap. “*Dream*, okay, enough.”

His gut concaves in a silent intake of air. George's ebbing laughter courses through him.

*Enough, enough.*

His eyes plummet down.

*"More, more, pl—please. Hands, Clay. Hands."*

*"I know,"* Dream breathed back, palms barred by hot fabric and face in George's neck. *"I know. Next time, George, I promise. Come on. In your underwear, for—"*

His forehead drops heavily to George's shoulder, cheekbones glowing, and he mutters, "Are you happy now, George?"

Dark keys go unclicked; rolling chat messages question the stretching pause. His eyes jump to the dangling metal net of a microphone, buttons green and listening in.

Dream slides the crook of his elbow away from his torso. "...George?"

Fingers catch his retreat, and his knuckles turn white under a firm, prolonged squeeze from George's hand.

"Callahan, um, go get some spruce." George's voice rumbles in a gentle thunder against Dream's chest. "No, no cheats. Here, take my—"

"George," he warns gently, thumbs pushing onto his lower back.

"—my axe," George continues. "Get a stack, or ask Bad, I—I don't know. I'm running an ad."

Relief tumbles down from his nose in a ripple of t-shirt fabric, and George adjusts in a shift against his lap. A sound catches in Dream's throat, threatening to push past the clamp of his jaw, and his hands curl into George's hips.

Socked ankles hook silently around his calves.

"Mute," Dream pleads into his ear. "*Mute.*"

"I'll—I'll be back in a few minutes, guys," George says. "Something came up."

He leans for the mic and Dream tilts with him, lips landing on the back of his neck. The sleek button is pushed, audio feedback plunges into sharp silence, Dream slides a hand up his chest and George's exhale spills into the air.

"You need to—" George's fingers splay across the breadth of his. "—*chill.*"

Dream's mouth runs up his throat. George's back curves; he kisses and aches against him, panting to the corner of his jaw. "This is killing me." His palm falls to George's thigh, squeezing and kneading the interior of his knee covered by long shorts. "I just want to feel you."

George reaches back and cups his jaw. "Oh my god."

Dream pulls him closer, abdomen hot on his spine, and the words tumble out of him thoughtlessly. "Turn off the stream."

George's face tips towards him languidly. Warm breaths glaze Dream's chin, and his chest swells with the awareness that they haven't kissed all morning; maybe he'd scared George off the night

before by nipping his mouth red on the godforsaken couch, tasting his tongue until low hums vibrated down his throat; nails embedded in his hair. Perhaps his nightmare kept the simmering urge away.

Dormant screens glow in a taunt before them, and as his head slips back to the lagoon, he's sure George can see it on his face.

“Turn it off.” Dream’s voice softens. “Please.”

Pupils lost in the dark of his irises, George meets his gaze. “Okay, Dream. Tell me what to say.”

His teeth sink into his cheek, and he wraps his arms around George’s core, squeezing tight, relishing in the shocked breath that escapes him. Low fire stokes in his gut at the immediate pushback from the weight covering his lap, slow and intentional against the pressing fabric of his sweats.

Microphone lights dip from crimson to a malachite green.

“Um, welcome back, chat, how are you guys?” George asks the looming screens. “Sorry about the delay, we...” He clears his throat.

“Poor connection,” Dream murmurs to his cheekbone.

“We had to check our connection,” George echoes. “I keep dropping frames for no reason.”

“Bad weather.”

“There has to be a—” George’s face tips as he lightly kisses his temple. “—storm, or something, I don’t know. Dream’s internet is the worst.”

Dream’s hands leave his sides in a reach over him, shoulders looming across George’s upper back. “The...” He scarcely collects his rampant thoughts. “The power.”

“We fixed it for now.” George’s voice grows faint as his hand floats cup his cheek. “But there’s... a chance that the power might go—”

Screens plunge into darkness, curving monitors of dead pixels and dim mirrors reflecting back their disheveled appearance. Frayed hair and wrinkled shirts silhouette them against a backdrop of morning light, and his eyes rake over George’s face, the dark of his gaze; silent parting of his lips. His own features are sharp and shadowed, and a slumbering part of him wakes at the sight of them held in George’s palm.

He barely recognizes himself as his fingertips pull back from the kill switch, hidden in a land of wires, and touch to George’s jaw.

George lolls his head in compliance, flexing lean muscles on his neck. “We should probably... tweet... something.”

“Use your hands if you want,” Dream says, heart pounding. “I don’t fucking care.”

Fingers slip into his hair. “Dream.”

His eyes flutter at the grasps, scalp stinging, and he strains to keep his mouth hovering over George’s throat. He lowers his jaw in a scrape against skin, and he watches George’s expression crumble on the decommissioned monitor.

*“Dream.”*

“God.” Dream’s hands explore warm dips in muscle and sprawl across George’s ribs. “How are you real?”

“Clay,” George rasps finally, “*do something.*”

His hands lower to George’s knees and drag nails up his thighs, bunching the hem of his shorts in a climb across skin and hair. He loves the low sigh landing in his ears; smiles gently when he stalls halfway and hears George mutter a curse.

“Easy, George,” he murmurs. “Don’t we have ‘plenty of time—’”

Firm fingers grab his hands and drag them up between warm thighs. Heat inside Dream’s skull incinerates to his cheekbones, palms cupping George through thin material, and he buries his face into his neck.

“I...” Dream’s words ebb and flow with his restraint, and his hands squeeze restlessly. “Please, can I—”

“You promised,” George whispers.

“I promised,” Dream exhales and slides fingers underneath his waistband.

As the back of George’s skull hits his collarbone, a memory from their first few hours together burns through his brain; the doorway digging into his shoulder on one side of the dusty room, George plucking trinkets from his desk meters away, and the insurmountable space between them. In spite of his week-old self, he presses lips down George’s throat devotedly, sinks teeth into skin and draws soft sounds from his chest.

*Don’t call him.*

*Don’t want him.*

*Don’t tell him.*

He pours into George’s ears how he felt the night before when rooted on the couch, wishing for him a floor above with thoughts of shower steam, how he’s wanted this heavy, desk-crowding closeness in his lap for hours on their calls; how he dreamt of him for days and nights since summer. Every grind down or broken reply brings Dream closer to losing ground beneath him, mind consumed by a blissful fog.

Eventually, George turns dazedly and meets his mouth with a tapered sigh. Dream melts into him, chest and body, parting his lips and passing saliva between their teeth. Fingers shiver through his hair and drift onto his neck.

Stuffy heat from the blind-drawn room and dusty computers creeps across his skin. George presses a palm on his collarbone, firm and steady, and his hand begins to slide down Dream’s chest. His shoulders sag back instinctively into the mesh of the chair, and thighs shift over his own until George can freely touch his sternum, abdomen, waistline.

“You don’t—” He pulls back from a lingering kiss. “You don’t owe me. Anything.”

Thumbs stroke his stomach. “Do you not... want me to?”

“I do,” he breathes, “but it’ll—I don’t want to be too—” He swallows carefully and wanders through his words. “You don’t understand what you do to me. What... what *this* would do to me.”

A lazy smile sprawls across George’s face, and he leans back to kiss Dream slowly, mouth pushing, sucking softly; teeth visiting his bottom lip. He lets George’s name tumble from his tongue without knowing why. A hand glides over the front of his sweats, and muscles in Dream’s stomach tense to keep himself from rising into the touch.

“Relax, Dream.” George’s low voice drifts and swirls in the air around his head. “Relax.”

Puffs of air blow down unsteadily from his nose, and his head cranes back. George’s palm slides inside his sweats, wrapping slowly, and his jaw falls open in release of an unhindered, breathy noise.

“There you go,” George says softly. “Good.”

His hips tip into George’s hands as a wave of gold crushes his chest. He can’t remember the last time he’d been spoken to so gently, not in life, not in dreams, and discomfort tightens in his throat.

“This—won’t—” Dream forces out between huffs. “—take long.”

George presses lips to his cheek. “You’re okay.” He kisses Dream’s lips. “I have you.”

Disbelief rings in his ears; heaven trickles through his limbs and creeps in dewy corners of his eyes. Unspeakable words claw at his gut until George coaxes his thoughts to silence again. Morning goes in a loving slowness his house has never known, and afternoon comes with paint.

—

Rolling in a lazy stretch across the wall above Dream’s head, streaks are passed from a spongy cylinder coated in dripping blue. The hue matches the gentle sky they viewed above laundry piles, cat food and dishes in hand after Patches urged them from the dark den of his bedroom. Trees and uncut grass shift in the breeze amid a humid world past the bow windows, cracked open, leaking noise from the view of suburbia.

Dream steps back on the covered floor, and he tips his head at his creation with a mimicked grin. “George.”

“Hm?” A light clicking of keys from over his shoulder comes to an abrupt stop. “Please don’t cover that.”

Dream contemplates the wall of white primer before him, the large, freshly painted smile of blue spanning in wide strokes, and he frowns. “I’m covering it.”

George clicks his tongue in disapproval, and Dream’s eyes jump back to his perch opposite the end of the office space. Surrounded by low boxes and dry brushes, an SD card sticks out of the side of George’s computer in his lap, and cords dangle in connection to the nearby camera.

“If you want me to keep it,” Dream suggests, “you could take a picture.”

George’s eyes drop back to his keyboard. “No thank you.”

Warmth seizes Dream’s body as he smiles, and he crouches down in a return of his roller to a paint-pooled tin. “How’s it coming along?”

“I should have sent these to her earlier this week,” George mutters. “Remembering what to fix now is extremely annoying.”

He hums. “Cause you’re distracted?”

“Because I’m bored,” George corrects, but as his eyes drift up to meet Dream’s face, his expression tips wry. “Maybe I’m a little distracted. Who wears all black to paint?”

A burn of turpentine floats towards his sinuses, and Dream holds the brush away from his face, glancing down at himself. “They’re my messy clothes.”

“You look like some kind of special agent. Or a ninja.”

The rolling brush is brought back to the wall as Dream smothers his mistake. “You know, ninjas actually wore blue instead of black to help them blend in with the night better. Optics, and stuff.” He hears a huff, and his elevated elbow stalls. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“*What?*”

“Nothing,” George insists, lips unkissed for over an hour pressing together in a small smile. “Keep painting. You’ve made no progress.”

“I’ve made—some. Some progress.” Dream surveys the wall with a frown; it’s been a while since he started carving out a proper office space from the unused room, adding primer over summer, beginning on blue a few weeks before Sapnap’s arrival introduced him to endless days of preoccupation. After George’s hands infused him to his desk chair, they both agreed between gripping wrists and recovering pants to try and do *something* besides crawling back into his unmade bed. It took ten minutes of his restless painting, and five more of glancing at the door, until George finally hauled in his editing equipment to join him.

“What made you pick this color anyway?” George asks.

“Pretty.”

“...Why’d you really pick it?”

Spreading a thin sheen across patches of white, Dream admits, “It’s good for your brain. Makes you more productive, or something like that.”

“And what book on becoming a genius billionaire did you steal that from?”

Dream turns and brandishes the brush towards him in a scold. “A home decor magazine in my mom’s bathroom,” he defends as George laughs. “Even geniuses read on the toilet, asshole.”

The edge of George’s laptop is tucked under his chin as he pulls the bulk of it towards him, smiling above the stark drop of black. “Do you kiss your mum with that mouth?”

His eyebrows raise. “I’ve kissed you.”

“Have you really?”

Dream scoffs. “*Have I?* What’s that supposed to mean?”

George shrugs. “I just think I’d remember something like that.”

“What is—is this your weird way of saying you want me to kiss you again?” His questions are met with immediate laughter, sharp and genuine in the shift of George’s shoulders, and Dream rolls his eyes indifferently despite the humming warmth on his face. “Okay, no. No more *flirting* with me to avoid getting your work done. Now we’re both not being productive.”

“Boo,” George says.

Paint returns to the wall in a climb towards the corner’s peak, and Dream’s stretching back strains with the added pair of eyes crawling across his spine. “Besides,” he says, “I wanted to make sure you’d be able to see whatever color it is, too.”

“Oh.” The softness of George’s voice heats his cheekbones further. “I can see a lot right now.”

Dream tosses a bright glance over his shoulder. “So you *are* checking me out?”

“I could be.”

“Well.” He gestures a hand down at himself. “You—you know what they say about pictures lasting longer—”

“I hate you,” George mumbles, but the slight upward tick of the corners of his mouth makes Dream smile, eyes lingering, stomach warm.

He resigns from the drying coat and migrates towards the wall of windows, slugging open the center frame of wood as glass doubles back his splotchy clothes. Outside air pours through the yawning screen, and he unhooks the dusty, black barrier with idle thumbs, lowering to sit in the windowsill. His head tips out to join a greener world, and the beauty rescues his paint-blind nostrils.

The humid breeze exhales with him. “I could go for some lunch after this.”

George hums, vibrations drifting from the deep end of the room. “Could you... stay where you are for a second?”

His body stiffens.

“Don’t turn around. Just relax, Clay.”

*Relax.*

His hand hooked on the side of the window loosens; slightly. The front yard of sheltered greens and well-watered shrubs offer only the barest peak of gray asphalt for his eyes to tack on to.

“What is it you’re hungry for?”

“Um.” Dream swallows. “There’s... there’s a good pizza place I could take you to, if that seems —”

A camera shutter cuts his words in half; though soft and silent, the sound leaves pinpricks rising on the back of his neck. Caught again in a framed moment he knows he’ll never see, his eyes trace the tops of palm leaves touching the clouding sky.

“Pizza sounds nice,” George says quietly. “You can move now, Dream. Thank you.”

Dream’s skull tilts back to rest against the window frame and he catches George clutching the dark camera still, studying down with the edge of his thumbnail between his teeth, barefoot on the

sheet-covered floor. The lack of sweat on George's brow is surprising given the midday heat, and his scrutiny towards whatever is captured on the screen.

"Is there..." George lowers the camera, looking up. "Open your legs."

"...You can't just say that."

George pulls the nylon sling off of his neck and he wanders forward, carefully avoiding light droplets of paint on the ground. Dream's eyes widen as he lowers down.

"What are you—"

"There *is* writing here," George says, pressing fingers to the wall behind Dream's calves. "No way you didn't know about this."

Dream doubles down, eyes landing on blocky black letters against weeks old paint. His head tips to piece together the upside-down words, and the message reads:

*Sapnap was here*

*u suck balls*

"Great," Dream mutters, and George laughs lightly. "He said he was helping."

"It's awesome. You're keeping it."

He peers down fondly, watching George hunt through a nearby box and pull out a thick packet of markers. "Are you graffitiing my house, too?"

"Yep."

Palms pressing on the windowsill, Dream leans over as the marker tip squeaks against the wall. The ink dries rapidly and they study it with tipping heads.

*George :]*

"Cute," he says.

George passes him the marker, and he scrawls an illegible signature in the space between their names.

"This might be the most expensive piece of art I own," Dream muses. "Even if I move, I'll cut it out. Take it with me wherever I go."

"Move?" George echoes, pointing the camera at the wall with a light click. "Why would you move?"

In a quiet recapping of the dark lens, George stares back up at him. The promises about living together he'd made with Sapnap at the airport terminal, born from a conversation over hot dogs and baked beans at his mother's place, deteriorate under the weight of George's eyes; the overhang of his unaffirmed visa. He can't imagine Sapnap wanting to live with the both of them after their recent progression in closeness, and he can't picture George wanting a presence hovering over them, either.

Mouth running dry, he says, "I don't want to live in Florida forever. You know that."

"So you always say," George muses, joining him in a careful lean against the window's edge. "But your family is here."

"My mom's offer still stands, by the way," Dream says in sudden remembrance. "If you'd want to go over there sometime, that is. Sorry, you just—you reminded me."

A quiet roll of a car drifts into the open window; birds chirp in the asters.

"Sure, Clay," George says finally. "That sounds really nice."

Dream exhales. "Okay, great, I'll—I'll ask her what day works best, then." His chest splits in relief when George glances away to set his camera down. "My sister should be around and maybe... I can show you where I grew up, and stuff. It's not much, I mean, there's parks that are mostly swamps, the mall, the neighborhood pool house, my uh, my school—"

A gentle squeeze is delivered to his palm, and Dream's attention dives to their interlaced fingers weighing on white wood. He didn't realize he'd grabbed George's hand.

"I think," George says, "you love Florida. It's all you ever talk about."

"I... don't think..." His eyebrows draw together, and his lungs burn. "...it loves me back."

George's eyes drop towards the ache in his ribs. Dream slides off the windowsill.

"You're moving soon, too," he dismisses, bending to retrieve the brush from the spattered floor. "—even though you'll probably miss your family. Right?"

"Of course I will miss them."

He turns back towards the glassy wall, and George's hands are folded in his lap silently. Dappled shadows grow dimly behind his shoulders.

Dream brushes the damp roller across his open palm, and he asks quietly, "How do you deal with it?"

George tips his head in the direction of the cardboard box his camera is resting on, idle and perched with care. Dream's eyes slide from the device towards his abandoned laptop, months worth of memories collected on software; an entire life he's been on the edges of but has barely seen. Kitchen conversations from a similar distance echo back.

*"What do you take pictures of?"*

Glistening water on Sapnap and his sister's heads, a balloon held in front of his face, skateboard wheels in an empty parking lot, animals in glass exhibits, the back of him in a windowsill.

*"Things that matter."*

Falling carefully in the breeze, the question finally forces itself from Dream's lips. "Why don't you take pictures of me?"

"...I just did."

"You know what I mean."

George gets off the stool of the window and retrieves his camera, eyes fixed on the controls. "Your face changes a lot," he mutters. "I wouldn't want to get it wrong."

Dream squeezes the roller, and paint drips down his wrist. “What would be wrong about it?”

“Nothing to do with *you*, Dream, I meant... my reasons for taking it could be wrong.” George steps past him. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

Dream stares at his back as he crouches, wires reconnecting from the sleek camera back to the cold laptop screen, and he blurts, “I want it to be you.”

George’s head lifts towards him. He clears his throat gently.

“When I face reveal, I want it to be one of your photos,” Dream says. “It would mean a lot that way, and... nothing else would look like me.”

“You really...” George rises to his feet. “You think so?”

“I know I don’t know much about it,” Dream admits, drifting towards him. “There’s just this feeling I get whenever I look at them. I know you’re talented.” His free hand loops lightly around George’s wrist, body tilting into the linking touch entirely. “I really want to see everything you’ve taken. If you’ll let me.”

Faint color emerges underneath George’s freckles. “I’ll... be finished with them by the morning,” he says. “Ask me again tomorrow.”

His pulse shoots towards the unpainted ceiling, and the urge to pull George into a crushing hug surges through his bloodstream—yet he doesn’t, because each brush of skin and moment of warmth edges on something he knew he’d want to say the moment George placed hands on him. If he were to hold him, maybe George would feel it. Maybe he already knows.

“Yours from the aquarium aren’t too bad, you know,” George says lightly, drawing his heart back down. “Except that they’re almost all birds. Or of me.”

“I am—” Dream gives his hand a squeeze. “—a simple man.”

George pulls his fingers away sharply. “You’re getting *paint* on me.”

He glances down at the messy smear shared between their palms, and a grin masks his betraying features. “Looks familiar.”

“I knew you were gonna say that.” George wipes his hand on Dream’s shirt in retaliation. “There, you deserve this.”

“Hey.” He tugs on the hem of his shirt with a scowl. “Just ‘cause this is messy doesn’t mean you’re allowed to—”

“Sorry, didn’t get it all,” George says, dragging streaks across his stomach.

Dream’s palm shoots out to grasp his wrist, and he spins the handle of the roller in the other. “You know what?”

“What?”

“I think I am too nice to you, now.” He fights back a smile when George scoffs. “Say you’re sorry.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Say *sorry*.”

Mimicking his accent, George drawls, “Sorry.”

Paint rolls in a stripe up George’s forearm, and his wrist rips away in a wild pin against his chest. Dream presses his lips together with strain until a slight wheeze bursts through, folding under the reception of a deeply frustrated stare.

“We—” His breath settles. “—are *even*.”

George clasps the spongy bulk of the brush, coating his palm in blue, and a cold smear pushes across Dream’s cheek before he can block the attack. “*Hah. Even.*”

He hastily wipes his face. “What the—that was *cheap*. Fuck you.” He swings the roller towards George again, missing as he dips out of range. “Get back here. Don’t—don’t *run*, you don’t want to track paint in my clean halls, do you?”

“You are a psychopath,” George says, voice lifting. “You have your crazy eyes, there’s no way I’m staying in here—”

“Georgie, come back,” he sing-songs, shutting the door with a flattening palm and diminishing their distance. “Come love me, c’mon. Give me a kiss—”

Warm palms clasp the sides of Dream’s face and tug him down into an abrupt collision of their mouths. He buckles into the embrace dutifully, brush clattering from his hands as he grasps George’s waist and curls his fingers in. Lips push his apart, his ankles shift backwards, pulling George closer and feeling fingertips float away from his abdomen.

George pulls back from him, foreheads pressed together as Dream exhales hot onto his nose.

“You are,” George breathes, “a simp.”

A handful of paint claps down over the top of Dream’s head.

His jaw falls open, shoulders crawling up in a pinch as liquid runs on his neck, trickling through strands of hair and dripping down his spine. In the corner of his vision, he speechlessly connects the paint bucket perched on a nearby stool to the blue state of George’s hand from the wrist down. Squeezing his eyes shut in a brief, slow wipe from the back of his knuckles, he opens them to a beautiful grin on George’s face, joy in his eyes, laughter finally bursting from his throat. The sound hammers in Dream’s chest.

*I love him.*

“I *hate* you.”

“You look so hot right now,” George says.

Dream braces his palms on George’s shoulders and shakes his moppy hair violently, sending a spray of paint splattering across their clothes. George lifts his arms in meager defense.

“*Dream*, st—stop, it’s getting *everywhere*—”

He kisses George again with puffs of laughter pushing between their lips, stumbling aimlessly in wide spins across the floor, nudging boxes, fingers in slick hair, noses screwing up at the pungent catastrophe drying on their clothes and skin. The air tips into brisk fragility in goosebumps on

Dream's skin, George and his voice and his closeness the only warmth he wants to cling to.

Cupping his face in both hands, Dream smears his thumb across George's cheek. "I've never... felt..." His head grows dizzy with the heavy-lidded way George gazes back at him.

"Yeah," George mumbles.

"Yeah," Dream repeats softly.

Hands pull him back in as his body tilts forward, pressing flush to the box of George's hips in a deep, shared sigh. Pursuing forward, his knuckles nudge hardwood and flatten George's back against the wall.

"Wet," George gasps in a sharp drop of his jaw. "Wet paint, the paint. Oh my god."

"No," Dream whispers, hands sliding to George's elbows, and they carefully peel him off the wall. "No way."

Turning, George displays the thick layer coating from his upper shoulders down to the back of his shorts. "You did this on purpose."

Dream drags a rapid finger through it and draws a sloppy smile. "I actually didn't."

"Dream."

"I *didn't*."

"No, Dream, hold on." George presses a hand on his chest. "Listen for a second. Listen."

He wipes his fingertip on a dry patch of George's sleeve and waits for more to spill from his mouth. George lowers the hand nudging his sternum, severing touch entirely between them, and Dream's ears capture a strained patter building somewhere nearby.

His jaw turns sharply. Beyond the open window and saturating gray asphalt with splotches of black, a falling drizzle descends onto the lawn. Gone is the blue sky as dew collects in the grass blades, clouded over during their mess of minutes, and the increasing spray sprinkles down from the gutters.

A crack of thunder splits overhead and rattles covered floorboards. His eyes jump back towards George's face, cheekbones and hair riddled with blue fingerprints, begging to be washed. Before he gets the chance to let the question leap from his lips, George smiles at him gently.

Dream grabs his hand and drags him towards the open window.

"Seriously? Dream—the door is right there—"

"Footprints in the hall," he dismisses, ducking under the propped up frame and swinging knees through the gap. "This is cleaner, I promise—"

"Our fingerprints are all over the stool," George complains from behind him, linked hands bridging their distance.

The soles of his feet drop onto damp mulch and soil. Rainfall mists Dream's skin and doubles around his skull as he stands outside of the room they've been cooped in for hours, and he lifts George's wrist through the window, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

Dream slowly guides him to clamber through white framed wood, and he questions, “Pepperoni or Italian sausage?”

George clutches his hands as he slides off the sill, and Dream smiles at the apprehensive crinkle of his nose below the roof’s overhang. “Are you wanting a soggy pizza?”

“I’m *planning*, dummy.” Puddles squish beneath each step as Dream pulls him closer in a world of wetlands, and paint trickles in light blue streaks down their skin. “Give me your order or I’m picking you up.”

George’s face tips up and bumps droplets on his nose. “Haven’t you memorized it by now on that little list of yours?”

“Alright.” Dream bends and clasps arms around George’s middle. “I’m calling ahead—” A hand thumps his back as he heaves George’s weight onto his shoulder. “—asking for olives—”

“*No*, no olives—”

“Spinach,” Dream continues, haphazardly swaying them in circles on the wet lawn. “Jalapeños, mushrooms, *ranch* dressing—”

“At least—let me *up*,” George threatens, “or I’ll get sick down your back.”

He lowers George to the pooling ground again and hoists him with a hop onto his back a moment later, elbows hooking underneath his thighs. Forearms clasp over his shoulders, and damp t-shirts share warmth in a sticking press between them.

A chin drops to his shoulder. “Half veggie, half meat,” George proposes. “Final offer.”

With a squeeze to his calves, Dream declares, “Deal.”

He hops George on his back lightly, and legs tighten around his waist; he spins them, hands tussle through his matted hair, and their pizza plans get lost in laughter and declarations to “charge onward” across the soggy suburbia. Alone in the pouring, beautifully silent neighborhood, voices carry, motions sway, and Dream rushes them in child-like steps down the side of his house to the flooding backyard.

Thunder splits the sky; hail drums down onto the gutters and bounces off their shoulders. George cups his palms inches in front of Dream’s face and collects icy pebbles to balance on his head.

“Tiara,” George insists.

“I swear.” Dream tips his head forward, and the flurry of frozen rain tumbles off of his nose. “The water is weighing you down.”

Soaked from head to toe, hands pull on his shirt when George’s feet rejoin the ground, and they both sink to lay in waterlogged grass embedded with snowy crystals. Pearls melt under Dream’s spine as he gazes at George, cheek resting on cold mud. Breathtaking in the rain; he is more than rain.

“It *is* heavy,” George murmurs, squinting into the sky. “I missed this kind of storm.”

Heart aching, Dream shifts his face towards the broad, gray clouds. His rain chilled fingers crawl across the grass and find George’s palm, hands intertwining between them as the palm leaves sway.

“Do you think...” George’s voice drifts quietly from his left. “...things will be different?”

His head turns. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why would they be different?” Water runs across his ribs, and he squeezes George’s hand. “Hey. Where are you?”

A drizzling pause passes through his ears, and a heavy warmth rolls to lay on his shoulder. Dream stills and relaxes slowly, further encouraging George to sink into his side, and he feels a sigh blow damp on his collar.

“All of this just started,” George says, “and then we’d be living together.”

Dream’s pulse spikes; he drifts free fingers to brush up and down the thin misting on George’s arm. “Well, you can... keep your own room,” he ventures carefully. “Come into mine whenever you’re bored. Move your setup in the spare one, maybe, have an office across the hall from mine. And...” He gives George’s shoulder a squeeze. “Take the bathroom Sapnap used, that way we don’t share at all. Easy peasy.”

George presses his nose into Dream’s neck. “For how long?”

“As long as we want.”

Face burying further, George mumbles, “You’re not staying in Florida forever.”

Splotches of rain drop loudly onto the skin of Dream’s forehead, and his eyes tip open. George’s lungs shift gently against him, grass tickles his heels, and he slowly pulls his face back to make their gazes meet.

“Then you’ll come with me,” he says softly, and he touches George’s jaw. “We pack up everything —” His lips touch to the bridge of his nose. “—put Patches in the car—” Pushing onto an elbow, he smiles down at George. “Drive ‘til we reach the snow. How’s that sound?”

“Cold,” George says breathlessly, eyes flicking across his face. “Can we... bring the hot tub?”

Dream surges down and kisses him, a happy hum rumbling through his throat as a rain-damp chest curves up against his. His hand slides up George’s lower back in a push of wet fabric, exposing skin to the downpour, huffing against his lips when goosebumps rise underneath his fingertips.

“Do you wanna go use it now?” he asks, and when George quickly shakes his head in objection, his mouth dips to rejoin him.

Water drums in his ears and beats down his back. Knees slide together, his hot palms gently grasp George’s face as he kisses him again, and again, and again, remembering the lonely heat dragging sweaty claws down his back in summer, forgiving himself for the weeks he spent trying to bury each urge away, hands clinging, tongue pushing, feeling gasps push against his lips and shaky fingertips press onto his spine. Chills skitter through the limbs beneath him. The warmth of indoors —laundry room towels and fresh clothes and steaming boxes of pizza—looms.

Dream pulls back in panting recovery. “George.”

“Wh...” Dazed eyes blink up at him. “What’d you say?”

“...Your name?” he clarifies gently.

“Oh,” George whispers, and he chuckles in a nudge against his cheekbone.

“Let’s go warm up, okay? You’re shivering.”

Cold palms clasp over Dream’s shoulders, and as he eases them off the ground with water running to their heels, George mumbles, “How are *you* not freezing?”

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Even in a landscape of layered comforters and windows shut for the night, George’s suffering at his side continues, cold and clinging on in any instance he can grab; ankles shifting against sheets, nuzzling to his side, lips on his cheek and hands clutching tight. To make matters worse, Dream grabbed a shirt fresh from the dryer for George to slug over his shoulders. Baggy and long, scented in his detergent, his clothes, his bed; George.

Needlessly, Dream overheats.

“What is your problem?” George mutters, fingers pressing on his bare chest. “It’s like the sun is hiding in there, or something. You ate it.”

“I’ve actually heard that one before.” Dream yawns, palm flattening over his. “This is coming from my parents, but, it was super hot the summer my mom was pregnant with me. The second I was born, it cooled off. So yeah, I ate the sun, swallowed it, absorbed it, whatever.”

George pulls back along the shared pillow and peers at him. “I believe it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhm.” A thumb pushes on his cheek. “You have a sunny smile.”

Dream stares back wildly. “That is the sappiest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Shut up.”

“George,” he says, “Georgie, you like my *smile*.” His wide grin earns a glare, and he lets his expression mollify. “I like when you tell me stuff like that, you know. No need to get all shy.”

“I’m not shy.”

“You are a little shy.”

“I’m *not*.” Arms cross over his middle and pull him closer in a clasp, knees pushing between his legs as George’s body melds into the warm cocoon of his frame. George’s voice disappears against his throat. “I’m not, Dream. I’m not.”

“Okay, hey, I believe you.” His middle is squeezed tighter, and his voice softens. “You okay?”

George’s face buries into his bare, pounding chest. Hands curling slowly, Dream grasps the bagginess of George’s shirt and balls fabric in his knuckles, pressing a kiss to the top of dark hair crowding against him. Ankles slip between his calves. Orange street lamps touch the ceiling fan.

“Today was good,” George says finally.

Dream’s tongue goes soft under the immediate riverbank of similar phrases weighing down his

jaw, each flooded with George's name and happiness and disbelief woven inbetween. He could tell him he'd move mountains; he could tell him he'd move himself.

"It never comes out right," George whispers, cutting his thoughts in two. "I wish I was like you. I wish I could write it all down."

"I..." Dream's hand lowers to spread across his upper back, and he says breathlessly, "I wish you could, too, George."

"...Maybe I should try."

"To write?" Dream asks gently. "For me?"

His eyes slip down as George tips his face up, and the tension wiring his mouth into a frown slips away as gentle lips press against him. Fingertips trace the soft skin of his jaw, shaved after paint made a home in his scruff. Mattress dips and bundled sheets swaddle his back as George pushes further, Dream tilts in slow surprise, head flattening on the pillow.

"Maybe," George repeats carefully, "I can show you."

"Show—" Dream's words beat back against his chin. "Show me?"

George's lips lower the corner of his mouth, linger, and start on a gentle path down his jaw. A deep, growing inhale takes hold of Dream's lungs as his throat grazed by an incinerating trail.

"George." A kiss lingers on his collarbone; heat sprawls from his sternum. "*George.*"

Against his chest, George murmurs, "Trust me."

Dream's hands slide into his hair, helplessly petting his skull and tracing the tops of his shoulders as they dip lower and lower, warm lips descending on his abdomen. His fingers tremble over his scalp.

*Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.*

Dizzy pinpricks dot the dark ceiling overhead in a net of self made stars. George's palm flattens on his stomach, guiding his inhales to even, in and out.

"You're... shaking," George observes quietly, eyes drifting up.

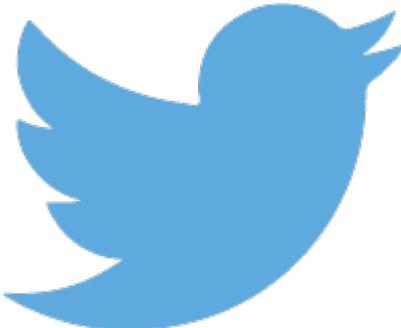
The night sits in his gaze; his fingers slowly hook the plaid of Dream's waistband.

Brushing a thumb across his forehead, Dream breathes out in confession, "I'm fucking obsessed with you."

-



goose



@this-isnt-real



573

y'all are crazy i didn't dox anyone 9:10 PM - 18 September 2020 □ 201



8.4K

## Chapter End Notes

hi everyone, hope you're doing well, I missed you all :) been working hard and managed to get this chapter done though it took longer (and ended up much longer) than I thought it would. lots of moving pieces and changes, I was happy to finally write out some of these scenes as they've been floating in my head for a while. apologies for the twitter thread scare (you all have trust issues <3) but I loved reading your thoughts and theories during the break. thank you for your continued faith in me and my writing, again I really wanted them to spend time together, for us to feel Dream's heart, to show their funny little ways of love. my hope is for no stone to go unturned. many plans. excited for it.

thank you all for your comments, kudos, care and art and support. forever grateful. I hope this update finds you at a good time and you have fun reading and escaping into this story :) love, best wishes, see you soon. -dakota

# Homesick

## Chapter Summary

Dream and George's week alone begins to feel like home.

## Chapter Notes

// This chapter contains implied mature content.

Hello all, and welcome back. Big chapter as per usual. Take it slow <3 Peace and love.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Large squares of sun brand Dream's back and pull him from heavy sleep. His forearm is draped heavily over George's waist, blond hairs catching the incoming glow with each inhale, and sinking back to shadows as George breathes out.

Beads of sweat climb down the dip of Dream's bare spine; dark hair sticks to George's forehead in a sprawl. His fingertips itch to drift through the honeyed air and brush the strands away, but the pad of his thumb would linger, trail along the warm bridge of George's nose and trace the curves of his lips. His pink lips, his *soft* lips, dry and undisturbed despite their swollen redness in the dead of night, when Dream pulled his face up with shaky thumbs, kissed and bit and savored each glistening inch of them until George pushed on his chest, gasped for air; laughed against his teeth.

*Calm down*, Dream wills himself, eyes squinting into direct sunlight. *Down, down, down*.

He prefers the white burn in his retinas to the heat flushing down his chest and lodging against the mattress. Mornings haven't been *easy* since George started sleeping in his bed, and as the night before oozes through his sunsoaked limbs, Dream fears today may be the day to kill him dead. The full body rememory enraptures him again of grasping George's hair between his thighs, his trembling fingers in their interlaced grip, warm pinpricks in his eyes and dryness in his throat over a whispered mantra of "*thank you, thank you, thank you.*"

He'd hate to die so soon. George would never forgive him for it, for croaking out before he wakes, before Dream can see his bleary brown eyes blink open and let a confession burst from his lips.

*Okay, so. Don't wake him up.*

He could buy a bouquet of flowers, or craft a breakfast in bed. George would crucify him for both.

Dream blows out a feeble, frustrated breath.

George stirs slightly, his brow creasing, and he drags a hand up to tug on the scoop of his collarline before lazily falling still. Above his shirt—*Dream's* shirt, borrowed and beautifully slept in—a light sheen of sweat gleams on his pale throat. Yellow arms of heat seem to crawl over them both.

Dream unpeels his chest from the sheets and reaches for the window. Blinds descend in a whir;

he's halfway through tugging the curtains shut when a soft murmur stalls his hands.

“Dream?”

Warmth springs to his cheeks. Shy words saturate the tip of his tongue to the taste of, “*Good morning*,” and, “*I think you cured my nightmares*,” or, “*can I return the favor?*”

He veils the window in a terse overlap of cloth and lowers back down to a bed freed from sunlight.

“You’re awake,” he settles on finally, and as soon as the words slip from his mouth, a slight frown lines George’s features.

Eyes still closed, George tosses an arm over his shoulders and mumbles, “Don’t go.”

“I’m not.” His lips press into a small smile. “I’m right here.”

With a clumsy pull downward, his face lands on George’s neck. Through a sigh, he hears, “Liar.”

*Oh.*

Dream’s lips recede carefully.

*You’re not awake.*

He has never liked the way words sound when falling from George’s sleeping mouth, not on long calls, during naps or nights or slow mornings where the muttered phrases of nothingness land with a haunting he now *knows* he’s responsible for; *knows* he burned there. Even his own name, “*Dream*,” rings out as a question meant for a ghost.

Cradled in George’s hands as fingers crawl across his scalp, Dream’s head weighs with the certainty that he’d mentioned his discomfort, once, somewhere in the fall before everything changed.

“*So.*” George cleared his throat, seconds ticking away beneath his name on Dream’s phone screen. “*You have a fear of sleepwalkers.*”

“*Well, okay, no. I wouldn’t say that. I’m not—not scared of you.*” He remembers George’s laughter; the air-conditioned chill on his back as he rolled to press his cheek on the pillow. “*But the sleepwalking part of it, maybe. That’s not even a real phobia, though.*”

After a pause and faint typing on the other end, he ate his words.

“*It’s you.*” George’s glee drifted through his earbuds. “*You’re a somniphobe and you hate me.*”

“*It’s creepy, George,*” he insisted defensively. “*All the lights are on, but no one’s home. If—if I saw you like that, I…*”

The quiet pause, eyes drifting down the empty space on his mattress; a shift in late night voices.

“*Would you wake me?*” he was asked.

“*…Isn’t that dangerous?*”

Soft enough for Dream to never broach the subject again, George answered, “*Not if it’s you.*”

His ears burn in remembrance.

“George,” Dream says, and his gut strikes as hands curl in his hair. “Hey, hey. C’mon.” He squeezes George’s shoulder. “Wake up, please.”

A slow inhale stirs in George’s chest halfway underneath him. His cheek drags back on the pillow as George’s eyes blink open, widen; travel across his face.

Sun oozes into the low thrum of his exhale. “Dream.”

“Hi.” Dream clears his throat. “You uh, you were talking in your—”

George tugs him into a clumsy kiss, soft and rousing and deep, and his head sparks to blankness. Lips push against him with unabashed warmth, his chest caves, tasting tongue on his and blindly indulging in shameful morning breath. Humidity soaks into Dream’s skin through their tangling limbs.

An inhale splits against his mouth as George pulls away. Lips buzzing numbly, Dream stares back.

“Sorry,” George rushes. “I’m—I’m not sure why I—”

“I missed you,” Dream blurts. Heat sprawls in a red smear down his cheeks and chest.

“You...” George smiles at him dazedly. “What?”

“You were asleep for so long.” His face ducks to rest on George’s collar. “What were—what were you dreaming about?”

A thumb strokes between his shoulder blades. “This, I think.”

His head and heart could slip into the warm pool their bed becomes under the honesty of George’s answer; *this, this, this*. Dream clings to it. Somewhere in him, he vows to never let it go.

“Yeah?” The word tumbles from Dream’s lips uselessly; he lets it slide into a brief kiss on the exposed stretch of George’s neck.

“Yeah,” George says breathlessly.

A hand traces up Dream’s side, and his crowded skull disperses into mirroring the touch with light, trailing fingers. “What were we doing?”

“Just kissing.”

“Just kissing?” Dream echoes lightly, and he traces over the dips of George’s ribs. “Why wasn’t I doing more?”

“In my dreams,” George mumbles, nails prodding his stomach, “you’re a prude.”

His face drops to George’s chest with a lazy grin. “So you’re a slut.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Oh,” Dream drawls, hand curling on his hip as George rolls onto him. “You can dish it, but you can’t take—”

Warm lips usher his soft giggles into a pleasant hum. His fingertips climb inside the t-shirt swallowing George’s core, and he splays palms on his lean, lower back, lightly layered in sweat.

“Did you—” George’s words are nearly lost against his lips. “—sleep okay?”

“Mhm.” Dream wanders slow hands down the backs of briefs, kneading fabric and flesh, and a sharp puff escapes George’s open mouth. Legs drag over his thighs, and he murmurs, “Good morning.”

“Stop talking,” George breathes.

Dream kisses him with a smile, and he says, “No.”

“Clay.” George’s voice nearly disappears in his breath. “Please?”

He dissolves thoughtlessly, tilting George down and kissing him into the pillows. Soft cotton drags on Dream’s knuckles as he reaches for small palms, enveloping them in his own, and an enthused exhale rings through his ears. A lick of pride curls through him.

*I’m here.*

His thumbs wrap around George’s wrists.

*I’m real.*

“*Liar*,” George’s sleeping whisper singes his open heart.

He pins George’s wrists beside dark tufts of his hair, and a puff slams through his ribs. Dream blinks sharply, chest crushed against George’s core, and he loosely connects his clasp on straining hands to the open thighs his hips fell bracketed between.

From above him, Dream forces out, “Oh.”

“I’m sorry—”

“*Don’t be.*” Dream leans his weight carefully onto his forearm, letting George’s ribs batter for even inhales beneath him. “This is just—close, that’s all.”

“We can...” George’s eyes flit over his face. “We can stop, if you want.”

The pillow George hauled into his room nights ago cradles his head, hair clung to by invisible fingers of static, face rosy and jaw lined with stubbled, sandpaper skin. Dream’s fingers uncurl from his wrists, and the slight flutter of dark lashes on his release burgeons a tightness in his throat. His eyelids dip in a heavy daze as he processes, barely, the trembling muscle on either side of his thighs.

“You smell like me,” Dream manages to say as the awareness drifts into his nose.

“...I stole some of your shampoo.”

“George.” Dream’s head falls to his neck, breathing slowly against hot skin. “Are you *trying* to kill me?”

George laughs. He laughs, and the familiar, bright sound jostles against Dream’s ribs, infecting his pounding heart with the surreal mundanity their days have become—his shower, his clothes, his bed, his *life* on George’s body and all he’s ever wanted in his hands—yet somehow, closeness isn’t close enough. Kissing him again is not enough.

*I want to live inside your laughter.*

*I want more. I want everything. I want you.*

“George?” he repeats, and a hum rumbles against him. “In... in your dreams, have we ever...”

“...What?”

His palms slide under George’s back, forearms pulling him in. “Don’t make me say it.”

“Say it,” George pleads softly.

“You... you’ve thought about it?” Heels press into Dream’s calves silently. “About—about me?”

“Dream.”

His fingers curl into fistfuls of shirt fabric, knuckles lodged between the mattress and George’s back. “*When?*”

“Over the summer.” George’s voice wavers when warm lips press down on his throat. “Y—yesterday.” His jaw cranes under a warm, gliding tongue. “*Now.*”

A soft noise from Dream’s mouth blows across his cheek. Everything in his head is incinerated by thoughts he’s never dared to name, and his hips sink down, the mattress swallows them both, and George kisses him as the ache in his chest yawns wider.

Somewhere between clipped breaths, George asks against his cheek, “Have you? About me?”

“Maybe,” Dream confesses in a bloodrush. Ankles cross behind his thighs, locking him close, and he blindly kisses George’s mouth as his face tips up into him. “George.” He tears himself back raggedly. “George, what is—what is happening?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. Fuck. Okay, let’s just—” He leans back as George sits up, the weight of the world tipping with them. His palms float down to brace the box of his hips.

*Now, his skull pounds with George’s answer. Now, now, now.*

“I... I’ve only ever...” Dream squeezes his eyes shut. “Done that with someone I...”

Paint drips through his head when George’s fingers comb his hair, quick and soothing as his voice has always been on call for years, messages in his inbox, springing texts on his phone, landing in Florida a week and a half ago to become someone *real*, someone *tangible*, someone he could love forever and never live without.

“Someone I’m dating,” Dream says finally, mouth running dry.

George’s hands slip down from his neck. Warm chills flood across his skin.

“Romantically,” Dream clarifies.

“I got that, Dream.”

“I’m sorry.” His tone crumbles into a hurried hush. “That’s not—I’m not trying to, like, make you—can we just go back a couple of seconds?”

“No,” George says. “Look at me.” Hands push his bare chest back until he obliges, meeting an

unyielding, soft stare. “I’m still... waiting for the answers. Okay?”

His shoulders sink with his gut. “Right.”

George cups his face in warm, steady palms. “I’m getting there.”

“I know,” Dream says, and thumbs swipe along his cheeks. He pulls a gentle smile from the weight in his face. “I know.”

“You make me question everything,” George breathes. “You make me a little crazy.”

A light laugh nudges past the barrier lodged in his throat, and the sound seems to ease sunlight back on them both. “Yeah?” Dream asks gently. “What else would I make you?”

George tips his face closer, and a lingering kiss touches the bridge of Dream’s nose. “Breakfast?”

“Breakfast,” he repeats in a sigh against George’s mouth, melting into a slow, wandering kiss. His hands slide down to hook at his knees, brushing the hair on his thighs in dragging strokes.

George parts from him. “Maybe—maybe lunch.”

The warmth of Dream’s chuckles saturates their close ribs, and George pulls him back down to the blankets and sheets.

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Steam of frying eggs coats Dream’s face in billows, ears serenaded by hissing heat from the pan, George’s commentary; a queue of songs from Karl and Sapnap’s playlists crackling through the speaker. Bread warms in the oven. Diced tomatoes in olive oil and herbs are stirred in the wooden bowl propped on George’s lap, George is on the open wall to the living room, and Patches curiously nudges whiskers to elbows at his side.

“They cannot have any,” Dream repeats over his shoulder.

“She looks so hungry, Dream.”

“She’s *tricking* you.” He rotates the skillet above the burner, flipping the asparagus-embedded frittata onto a plate with a careful scowl. “If you’re going to live here, you can’t be a sellout.”

Wood clops against the bowl’s interior. “You’re literally making me lunch.”

“I said stir, not mash,” Dream chides gently. He meets George’s eyes from across the kitchen, smile oozing with oil in the pan. “For us, George. I’m making it for us.”

“Us,” George repeats, nose wrinkling slightly.

Dream rolls his eyes and tips the dish back onto the skillet. “Bread duty. Don’t forget it.”

He hears George’s feet drop to the floor behind him. Ghostly steps follow, light fingers squeeze his sides, and his abdomen presses on stove dials to let George slip by. Oven doors creak as the presence of a warmed loaf wafts into drifting sunbeams.

Patches steps across the counter, and Dream smiles. “Hiya, sweetheart.” She meows as cabinet doors thud. “I know,” he coos. “He’s being noisy, isn’t he?”

“You baby her so much.”

“She *is* a baby,” Dream says, lightly poking her nose. “Isn’t that right, baby?” He hears George scoff. “What, you jealous?”

“The opposite, actually.”

Prodding the frying frittata with his spatula, Dream muses, “Calling you that *would* be weird.”

“You have before.”

“What?” His head snaps up. “No I haven’t. When?”

“Last night. That’s what it sounded like, at least.” The toasted shell of sourdough is shuffled onto a cutting board. “You’re quite... expressive, you know that?”

His face ignites. “Well that’s—that’s *different*, that’s not, I wasn’t—I wasn’t aware, okay? I didn’t know.”

“Mhm.”

“Shut up.”

A serrated knife is plucked idly from the block, and as George hums along to the tune of an old love song, Dream watches him exist in his kitchen. Warm fingers of sunshine drag through his dark hair. Hands Dream has learned how to hold survey the bread, rotating it by the heels and begin sawing apart neat, confident slices.

Dream quietly shuts off the burner. “You like to bake,” he says, “don’t you?”

“It’s okay.”

He slides the pan to cooling coils. “I’d totally make something with you, you know.”

George clicks his tongue dismissively. A grin warms on Dream’s face as he gravitates towards him.

“Do you know your birthday recipe?”

The dagger extending from George’s palm slows halfway through the center of the bread. “Not...” He chops down. “Not by heart.”

“Why don’t we ask your mom for it?” Leaning his hip against the island, he surveys the surplus of pieces growing on the board. “Add cake to the list of stuff we’re bringing to dinner.”

George’s eyes find him. “Your mum got back to you?”

“...I’ll text mine again if you text yours.” A sigh weighs down George’s shoulders in the shape of Dream’s name, and he eases a palm down his back. “You haven’t been calling.”

Metal teeth hit worried wood. “I can’t.”

“Hey.” His fingers stall the knife in George’s grip, and the blade is laid flat before them. “We can.”

Light fingertips push the bread into flat, crumb-ridden rows, and Dream rotates George’s shoulders until dark eyes bore into his chest. He tucks a thumb under his jaw. George has been meeting his gaze less since being dragged to the kitchen, cheeks coloring long in the heartbeats after, and as his face tips up fluidly, Dream can barely blame him.

His breath grows thin in the cage of his chest. Last night and their frenetic morning were too kind to them both.

“She doesn’t always answer,” George mumbles as his thoughts slip down.

Hand dipping into the fabric of George’s sweats, Dream withdraws the phone from his pocket. “If it’s me,” he says with a pinch to his hip, “she won’t be able to resist.”

“Freak.” George turns back to the array of bread slices. “No more jokes like that.”

“Aw, why not? ‘Cause we’ve—” He glances towards Patches and lowers his voice, nose nudging George’s temple. “*Done* stuff?”

George huffs. “She speaks cat, not English.”

“What if she’s a mind reader?” he defends, and small shoulders lean back into him. “You never know, George. She could be memorizing all of our thoughts for blackmail, right here, right now.”

Fingertips trail over his knuckles and veins as he hunts through contacts on the screen before them. “Poor Patches, then,” George murmurs.

The scrolling stalls.

He squeezes George’s middle firmly. “We can skip lunch.”

Weight presses back onto his toes. “It took us long enough getting down here in the first place.”

“Is that a yes?”

“*Dream*,” George complains with a flick to the dormant screen.

“Okay, okay, fine.” He begins to type, and George’s hands wrap over his wrists as the message unfolds:

*Hi Mrs. Davidson this is your sons boyfriend Clay—*

“Idiot, no,” George says, hasty thumbs striking the words as Dream’s chuckles vibrate between them. He attempts again:

*Hi Mrs. Davidson this is Clay from your sons phone. We’re figuring out what to do today and I have decided I want George’s cake—*

The phone is torn from his grip. “Stop that.”

“Wh—” He wheezes as George conjures another draft rapidly. “What?”

George’s message sends through in an impassioned “swoosh” resounding from the connected speaker.

*(12:34 P.M.) Hi Mrs. Davidson, this is Clay from your son’s phone. Would you mind sharing George’s birthday cake recipe? We are hoping to bring a dessert to my family’s house. Thanks.*

“Wow,” Dream muses. “Apostrophes and everything.”

“You sound polite.” George discards the screen face down on the cluttered island. “It should make her happy.”

Ingredients sprawl in a messy line down the length of his kitchen counters. As Dream retreats to carving triangle pieces from his frittata, hands George a platter of meats and cheeses and olives, nudges the backs of his heels and encourages him to scoop the dressed tomatoes onto baked bread, he realizes he's prepared a meal larger than himself without breathing.

*Happy.*

A week with Sapnap, a week with the three of them, four days with George alone, and he's gotten used to this.

High notes and low beats command the room from the speaker, he pulls George closer to clumsily sway in an off-key recitation of "*Break My Stride*," Patches demands inclusion from their haphazard feet until they lift her, cradle her—and for once, his life is his own. He could change nothing and still be happy. He'll always be this happy.

A chime contorts the music, and George fights against his limbs breathlessly. "Let me—*go*."

Reluctantly busying his free hand with a loaded plate, Dream questions, "What's the verdict?"

"She..."

The song fades out indefinitely. Patches' claws curl into his shoulder.

Quietly, George says, "She likes you."

Whiskers brush his cheek as Patches cranes her head, and Dream moves with her, air flooding through his ribs at the small smile spreading on George's face. His phone is clutched in both palms, peering down at the screen's glow as though it's responsible for every inch of sun soaking wooden cabinets yellow.

"Does she?" Dream breathes.

George glides on his socks, holding out the screen for the three of them to study. Dream lowers Patches to the counter and squints to decipher dust-glinted words.

*(12:46 P.M.) Recipe later when home. Good idea x.*

"I..." The abrupt tone nearly slips him by, but the affection sneaking into the last letter warms his chest at her familiar, George-like manner. "I see where your eloquence comes from."

"Fuck off." George drags his plate along the counter, and Dream clings to the audible ease in his voice as he rounds in tandem. "Maybe, um, if you wanted to—" A chair is tugged out beside him. "We could, like, Facetime her after it's made or something. She'll want to judge our work."

George's fork parts fried yellows and greens in a burst of steam. Sourdough weighs on Dream's tongue, jaw growing loose in his chews. Six years of digital love—speaking to George's parents once or twice on call, tossing regrettable jokes behind their backs, texting to gather gift ideas—and yet he's *never* been asked to bare his face.

"Oh," he says, swallowing slowly, "my god. Are you asking me to meet your family?"

"No."

He abandons his bite in a clatter of bread crust on ceramic. "You *are*."

A kick spikes through his shin. "It's just a video call."

“It’s a *moving picture*.” Dream presses greasy lips to his cheek and grins at the swift wipe that follows. “You’re adorable, I’d—I’d *love* to, George.” His palm drops to George’s thigh, squeezes; makes him meet his eyes with a gentle sigh. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Asking.”

Head tipping slightly, George mutters, “Dork.”

Leaning in to kiss him, Dream says, “Yeah.”

Brief and loving, over before it begins, soft lips touch the curve of his mouth before returning to their labored-upon meal.

“I’m—I’m going to make her fall in love with me,” Dream declares in retaliation, and George giggles around his bite. “I’m serious, George, I’ll split up your parents and then—then we’re three for three.”

“What?”

“The Dream team,” he insists.

“What is—*wrong* with you?” George reaches for alleviation of water between breaths. “I’m gonna tell Sapnap.”

“Oh no,” Dream feigns, plucking olives from the shared platter before them. “What’s he gonna do? Sick his boyfriend on me again?”

Their ankles knock together beneath the speckled counter. “You’re in an awesome mood today.”

“I wonder why.”

George’s lips press together in a smile, softening the longer the contact holds. His dark eyebrows raise slightly towards the roots of his hairline, features hung with an ease once coveted, once foreign, and Dream loves him.

*Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*

“Wanna do something before we bake?” he blurts.

George’s eyes dive to their plates, to Patches lingering curiously an arms-length away, and back to glance at Dream. He offers up a slight nod, and a piece of salami is tossed onto stone for curious paws to snag.

“Depends,” George says, hand lowering back to their sides, “what exactly do you have in mind?”

Dream interlaces their dangling fingers, and he pins George’s palm against his own with a gentle squeeze.

Falling blinds plunge George’s room into thinly-veiled shadows of leaves, moving through daylight opposite the glass. Dream remembers how he dusted the sill a week and a half ago, vacuumed the floor, wiped down the mirror perched atop the dresser all while Sapnap tossed misleading advice of non-existent, “*missed a spot*”’s from his lean in the doorway. As he flops

onto the bed, his chest warms, realizing George has been mimicking his overzealous bed-making.

“Okay, so.” George clasps the closed edge of his laptop, lowering to sit on crisply white covers. “I didn’t know much about taking pictures at first—”

“If you’re apologizing before I see anything, I’m going to smother you.”

“I’m explaining myself,” George contends, and he huffs on the receiving end of an upward stare. “They won’t make sense otherwise.”

“Okay.” Dream scoots back in a rattle against the headboard. “Explain them, then.”

George’s lips press together, and the tapping of blunt nails on the bulk of the computer climbs to the ceiling. Dream’s eyebrows raise.

“They’re not very g—”

His arms swing forward and trap George’s waist, dragging him through a terrain of fluffy white until his back is flush to his chest. “Say it. Say it, I double-dog dare you.”

“They—” George laughs breathlessly. “They suck.”

Dream’s fingers dive into his ribs, grinning through his flurry of kisses against cheekbones as George gives up in the firm lock of his forearms. Somehow, he sinks back further into Dream, hair dragging on the cotton of his shirt.

“I’d done some stuff over the years before I got this camera,” George says, chest rising and falling rapidly in recovery. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to get out of it, I mean, I had an idea, but I don’t know.” He pauses, repeating, “Yeah, I don’t know.”

Dream presses lips to George’s temple and murmurs, “Breathe in.”

George does.

He carefully tips the laptop open. “And out.”

“We don’t have to... look at all of them,” George says slowly. Stored inside folders of folders, rows of pixelated images descend and wait for their viewing to begin.

His chin lowers to George’s shoulder. “Tell me about every single one.”

The first round of photographs flood the screen, and as they slowly tap through them, Dream can see George gradually finding his footing behind the lens. The initial bluntness Dream once had mistaken for indifference years ago is held between four corners of the straightforward shots, objects in the center and landscapes demanding immediate immersion. He recognizes subjects from their calls immediately; George’s family, pets, bedroom, food in the kitchen and nearby streets in his town. Simple things; small things.

*Things that matter.*

It isn’t until George starts talking, continues talking, doesn’t *stop* talking, that Dream realizes they aren’t photographs at all.

They’re memories.

The white sun of Brighton beating down his neck in the summer, George’s sister reaching hands

across a table of steaming crêpes, the window view from his quiet bedroom at dusk—all living moments George wanted to capture for the unnamed chord of truth ringing out between them. Never taking a picture for the sake of the picture, George chooses his memories carefully, editing even more so only to bring out the colors, warmth, contrasts and *feel* of a life already there; a life worth remembering.

A dusty shot of a quartz elephant resting below George's monitor expands before their eyes.

“You know that one,” George mumbles.

More photos pass, and they linger on the organized tier of George's beloved shoes.

Dream points to a pair placed inexplicably in the center. “I got you those.”

George clicks the keyboard. The same pair appears on his small feet, standing over a concrete sidewalk spattered with rain. Dream's breath holds in his chest against George's upper back, and he urges the rising curiosity down.

They quietly click to the next photo, and his filter dissipates in a rush. “You sent me this.”

George's hand draws back to rest on his abdomen. “Yeah.”

It's of George's young kitten, large eyes peering into the lens with sweet sparkle against gray fluff. Dream reacted to it with a heart somewhere in July, the dragging two month stretch when they weren't talking; instead exchanging pictures of cats to replace painful “*I miss you*”s. Throughout the lonely lens of George's summer, pieces of Dream are embedded everywhere.

“You... missed me?” Dream asks, taking George's palm and resting their knuckles on his chest.

“Yeah,” George repeats softly. “I was homesick.”

As soon as the word slips from his lips, Dream sees it. He becomes it. In every picture, every memory, every idle tap leading them to the next, the camera is homesick, the viewer is homesick, *George* is homesick. Dream places the ache in his chest, finally, into the familiar longing for a world no longer lived in.

He buries his face into George's shoulder and pushes air from his ribs with a squeeze.

*Home.*

Words claw at his throat.

*Sick.*

A hand floats back to sift nails through his hair, and he's never loved anyone more than this; wanted to slip underneath their skin and live inside their voice, their laughter, breathe for them, in them, with them, spend every waking moment and heartbeat and thought *for* and *in* and *with* him.

His hand sprawls over George's heart.

Orange light saturates the veil of his eyelids, and George says, “Oh.”

Dream's eyes leap open, and a sunrise touches the shore and sails and idle docks of a stretching marina. He tracks the watery horizon slowly.

“Why do I...” His brows draw together, tongue growing heavy. “Feel like I've been there?”

George's heartbeat quickens beneath his hand. "You do?"

"It's pretty," Dream says. "Really pretty. Like the type of place I'd go to talk to you, or something." A frown crosses his features as the movement of George's ribs ceases. "Have you shown this to me before?"

"Yes," George says breathlessly.

Dream pulls back to meet his gaze. "When?"

"It was the first real picture I ever sent you," George says, voice growing bare. "I used to bike here. We would text all the time, but then..."

Shirt fabric collects in his grasp. "George."

"It was the first time I'd ever heard your voice."

The image crashes through Dream's mind in a tidal wave; a younger version of George with more freckles, standing by the water, snapping a photo on his phone to send to the stranger in his earbuds.

"What made you go back?" Dream asks barely, though the answer is heavy on his shoulders before George's lips part again.

"I wanted to remember it," he says, "before I had to leave it behind."

A contrasting silhouette sweeps him ruthlessly: an older George after applying to move for him, live with him, uproot his life yet not talking for weeks, going to the same place to meet eyes over an orange ocean. The camera hangs as the only evidence of an entire world George is preparing to forget.

"Next time I'm going with you." The uninhibited words flood from Dream's throat. "After I face reveal, we're flying out and seeing all of Brighton. All of London. Everything."

George turns in his arms. "You'd really want to?"

"George," he says, honesty brimming painfully in his throat. "I want it more than anything."

Elbows fly over Dream's shoulders and cling tight around his neck, he doubles forward in the hug ruthlessly, keeping George's twisted body upright as the yearning future permeates each inch of warmth shared between them.

*I want our life together to begin.*

*I'm so tired of waiting.*

*I want everything, here and now.*

To the crook of George's neck, nose tickled by his hair, he breathes, "Will you take my picture?"

George's arms slide away from his chest. "Now?"

Dream tugs him back in, eyes screwing shut.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

He says, “Please.”

“You don’t understand what it’s like when I have pictures of you,” George confesses in a whisper to his shoulder, “I stare at them forever.” Fingers curl into Dream’s back. “It eats me alive.”

“You’re not leaving me behind,” Dream breathes. “You’re not, George. You’ll never have to.”

George’s lungs push and draw back steadily against his chest. Carefully, a kiss graces Dream’s collarbone, and his chest bursts in a release of warm air.

George untangles from him. The camera is pulled into their orbit from the far-off body of the nightstand, dark and heavy in George’s palms, and Dream can feel the belts of dust circling the air between them.

Softly, he asks, “What do you want me to do?”

George’s stare fixes on the box in his hands and drifts up to Dream. “I don’t know.”

Nerves clutter in his cheeks. “You’re the artist,” he says, smiling lightly, and George sighs.

Dream lets dark eyes climb over his face, slow and precise, tearing apart his pores until all that is left is him, an open wound; the scarred ache off-center from his heart. George’s gaze falls to his chest briefly.

“Tell me something honest,” George says.

“Honest?” Dream tips his head. “Honest... the sky is blue.”

George rolls his eyes, fingers bracing over the sleek camera controls. “Again.”

“You are my favorite person,” he says, and though his voice is meant to drip a nauseating saccharine, the admission lands surprisingly soft. His eyes fall to the camera looming in front of George’s chest.

“Keep looking at me, Clay.” George’s voice breezes through his ears, and a hand finds his on the bedspread. “It’s okay. Tell me anything.”

The presence of the camera fades until only George’s patient face remains, an orange ocean crashing quietly somewhere behind him. Dream stares and stares as the forest falls, the tide rises, and water is everywhere again.

*Don’t say it.*

A lens lifts elsewhere in his mind. His thumb brushes over George’s knuckles resting on star-white covers.

The shutter clicks, Dream breathes out the words, and George’s cell phone rings.

He isn’t sure what’s left his lips until George slowly pulls down the camera, and he’s met with a widening stare. Dream doesn’t breathe. Tossed out before casually on calls, mixed in with amicable laughter, he’s uttered the confession to George before but never with the weight of their world attached to it.

His heart pounds as the words pulled from it hover suspended in the air, waiting to touch down again and for ripples to become waves between them. George’s eyes drop back to the camera screen. The phone rings, and rings, and rings.

Trembling fingers fish the device from its pocketed cage, and George brings the screen to his ear.

“Mum,” he greets breathlessly. “Hi. Um, good. Good, and you? Yeah, he... he’s here.”

Dream offers a nervous wave, and a hint of a smile flits across George’s face. The wind leaves his ribs.

“He says hello,” George says politely. “Oh... sure. Hang on a second.” His eyes scan somewhere beyond the small stretch of their bed, and when he turns to face Dream, his voice is soft, and warm, and open. “Could you get something to write this down?”

“Yes,” Dream complies thoughtlessly, disbelief thawing in his hands. He scrambles to open the bedside drawer, pulling out a pad of yellowed paper and ignoring the tremors rattling through the pen.

Words of a nearly forgotten recipe begin to fly from George’s mouth, and Dream jots them down in an illegible scrawl, palms burning, body humming as the camera click echoes and echoes between his ears. *Cacao powder* and *eggs* and *flour* and *almonds*, and George is glancing at him between each item, dizzying his head until the meticulous instructions slow to a stall.

“Why?” George pauses for longer, and differently than before, he says, “Hello. Later, yeah... the recipe. My birthday one, Dad... no. No, just the recipe.”

Dream caps the pen, eyes scraping over the haphazard cake guidelines and praying they’ll be easy to follow. If combing over them in inky correction means George will avoid addressing his blurred bomb once the room is theirs to have again, Dream will take it in stride.

“...Okay.” George’s voice grows impossibly quiet. “Okay.” Dream’s eyes lift towards him, seated on the edge of the bed. “Okay.”

The screen lowers from George’s ear. Silence crawls across the black void clutched in his palm.

“George?” he questions.

The small back turned towards him begins to shift, barely detectable, into a disturbed pattern of shallow rises and falls.

He reaches for George’s back, repeating softly, “George, what—”

George’s shoulders rise in a pinch towards his neck.

Dream recoils his fingers. The sting of rejection crawls through his floating palm, spiking in his bloodstream, and barbed tendrils nestle into his heart.

With a shove to the bed, George makes for the door.

Dream hunts after him. “*George.*”

He breaches the yawning stretch of the hall and is greeted by a slam of the bathroom door meters down, rattling the walls and rocking the steady floorboards they’ve been balancing on all day. Before Dream can think, or speak, or take another step down the dimming alley, a vibration stirs by his heel.

His eyes stagger down. Discarded on the hallway floor, George’s phone glows quietly up at him. He brings it into his hands carefully. The glass lays unbroken with only one text from George’s

father slicing across the screen.

**(4:11 P.M) We're heading to Grandpa's now. Come with when you're back from Florida.**

Dream's heart hits his stomach.

The farm, and the rain, and George and his grandparents; a summer trip to an internetless home in an attempt to soften inevitable goodbyes. His head stumbles to connect the thinning lines, feet stumbling to the bathroom door, and his knuckles rumble in an urgent knock.

Hollow and unreadable, George's voice echoes through the unfeeling wood. "No."

"Are you okay?" Dream's jaw tightens as empty air fills the space of a reply, and he says softly, "I think I know what's going on and I need you to tell me if you're okay."

Nothingness scrapes on. His fingers slide down, hitting the door handle, and metals springs back into place indifferently.

*Unlocked.*

Dream pushes down on the handle tentatively. "Tell me not to come in." He waits for several, long heartbeats and pushes open the door.

The sight purges his skin of any warm residue leftover from their floaty afternoon, and cold ceramic, a dipping head of hair; the rushing air conditioner seizes him to the core. George's elbows are draped over the toilet. His forehead is pressed to his wrists.

"George," he breathes, and freezing tiles slip under his feet until he's kneeling at George's side. "Did you get sick?"

Missing from the cell of clammy walls is the telltale stench of nausea, and George shakes his head in dismissal. He begins to mutter, "Not—"

His voice stops hard in the cold air.

Dream hears it. Between the slumbering fear in his gut and pounding in his ears, he *hears* it, hears the dropped, unspeakable word, "Yet."

*Not yet.*

"George." He sees George's temples squeeze his vision shut. "Look at me." The temperance in voice flees from him. "Please, George, please look at me."

George lifts his eyes up from the dust lining the tile floor, and deep knowing slams into Dream's ribs. His dark eyes hang heavy with tears, a look he'd first seen on George after bringing him home from the airport, his thumb on the edge of a sticky note and gaze bridging through the mirror as his face weighed down in *apology*.

Everything in his tired eyes, the slope of his shoulders, press of his mouth to hide a slight quiver collects in a silent, hanging, "I'm sorry."

"No," Dream whispers.

Breath trembling, George confirms, "No."

Dark waters wrap over his limbs and the air leaves his scarred lungs. Blood surges in his ears, a

steady drum marching him into a familiar plunge beneath striking fluorescent lights.

*Denied.*

*Denied.*

*Denied.*

Dream waits for the breach of the surface, the breath of fresh air, alleviating words from George to redirect his mind, and they'll go back to the bedroom, finish looking at the gallery of pictures, and the phone slipping from his hand won't have disrupted their day—but as the cold screen drops to the bathmat, falls flat in a display of the waiting message, and George's face runs gaunt before he turns and hurls into the toilet—Dream knows the flooding wave won't break.

His hands move numbly despite the wake in his skull, rescuing a rag from the cabinets and discarding a cup of faucet-water at George's side. Illness permeates from the wafting bowl. Shaky fingers reach up and tug the silver handle down.

Dream gingerly touches George's back. He strokes his fingertips up and down tense muscles in a silent prayer for an encouraged lean, a softened sigh; *anything* beyond the rush of the toilet except a whispered—

“Please don't touch me.”

Dream's hand plummets. “We're going to be fine. This is—this is big, but we'll be fine.”

“*How?*” George's voice echoes out against the bowl, tinged with a scraping edge Dream hasn't heard since June.

“I don't—I don't know yet,” Dream says. “I don't know, but I'm here, and we can figure this out, okay?” Dryness climbs in his throat. “Okay?”

George grabs the rag and leans back in a slump against the wall. “I can't believe I let this happen.”

“George.”

“I knew it was going to happen and I let it happen anyway.” His face drops to his hands, voice strained in fabric. “I shouldn't have kissed you—I shouldn't have—have been so *stupid*—”

“Don't start talking like that again,” Dream forces out.

“I should've fucking left when he did.” A splitting sob curls George's shoulders and blows out in the bunched up rag. “I knew what—what would happen if I was a—*alone* with you, I knew, I knew, I knew—”

“It wasn't just *you*.” Dream collapses to sit before him. “You're barely breathing, George. Come on. With me, in, and out.”

Unsteady cycles of air pass between them. The splotchy cloth loosens in George's grip as he slowly pulls it down from his jaw.

“Okay,” Dream says. “Okay, that's better. Let's start over, okay? Can we do that?”

“Dream,” George says, and the finality sinks them leagues apart. “My flight is in three days.”

*Three days. Three nights. Three more, and then—*

*“I’m gone again,”* George had said, under the clinic awning, in the beating rain, *“and everything goes back. You’re a ghost, and I’m not here, and none of this will matter.”*

“No,” Dream says. “No, that’s nothing. We’ll try again. We’ll apply again. I’ll help you, I’ll—I’ll do it for you—please stop looking at me like that, George, and just *think* with me.”

George shakes his head. “It’ll take too long. It’ll fail, again, I’ll fail, again, and you’ll hate me for all of it.”

“Hate you?” Dream searches his face, leaning forward in a rug burn against his heels. “You know that’s not true. You know, George, you know how I feel, I just *told* you I—”

“Clay.” George’s head leans back against the wall with a thump. “Not now.”

“Yes, *now*,” Dream says desperately. “I’m not gonna let you decide everything is over all on your own—I’m half of this, too. I’m in this, too.”

“*You didn’t do this.*” George scrubs palms over his cheeks, rag tangling in his knuckles. “To—to us. It isn’t your mistake.”

“...The visa is a mistake, now?”

George’s stature crumbles at the word. Sunken eyes pour towards him, lashes damp, and George motions a hand wordlessly at Dream’s face. “*Look*,” the searing splotches in his cheeks confirm, “*look what happened.*”

“Living together.” Dream’s voice draws thin and clings to the walls like cellophane. “Making plans and—and everything this past week and a half, was all that a mistake, too?”

George’s knees pull towards his chest. “Dream.”

“You said that’s what you wanted,” he whispers. “Did you lie to me?”

“Of *course* not.”

“Then—then if it’s what we both want, I don’t understand why you’re giving up. Help me understand.” Dream’s fingernails bite into the flesh of his palms as George’s hands grasp his shins. “Do you... do you not want this as much as I do?”

George’s head lifts in a slow, painful shake. “That is not fair. That isn’t fair, you can’t—can’t ask me these huge questions like the answer is *simple*. It’s not.”

The edge of the toilet hits Dream’s spine as he sways back. “You can’t tell me if you want to be with me.”

Exasperation floods from George’s mouth. “How did I say that wrong?” Frenetic eyes crawl over Dream. “Why does—why does *everything* keep going wrong?”

Dream’s jaw flexes as their gazes bridge, and he shakes his head in slow warning. George’s eyes drop to the floor.

“Maybe...”

“George,” he pleads, low.

“Maybe we’re getting this all wrong.”

The whistling air conditioner cleans through his ears. Water drops from George's chin and buries in the floor mat at their heels. Dream uncurls his trembling fingers, and he reaches through the silence for the glass by his side.

Dream stretches out his arm between them. The cup grows heavy, slick sides threatening to drop from his palm, and George takes it timidly by the base. Their fingers don't brush.

Quiet gulps push down George's pale throat until the shell of the glass returns to dusty tiles.

Dream exhales, long and slow, and he speaks softer than sand. "How could you say that?"

"I don't know," George mutters.

"Did you mean it?"

"...I think you should leave."

"Really?" The tight ache in Dream's throat warps down to his gut. "Is that really how you feel?"

Edges of the cloth in George's hands are pinned together in slow, neat creases, folded into a tear-streaked square and pinched in place. "I need to get sick again," he whispers.

"I don't care."

"I don't want you to watch."

"I'm not leaving," Dream rasps. "I told you I wouldn't, so I won't." An arm shoots by him. "George." The trash bin is pulled by his ear, and he stares up wildly. "*George*, please, please don't —"

Rapid steps and hasty hands shut the bathroom door again, and he's left alone on the tiled ground. His head drops, and a splitting inhale rushes down his throat, expanding his chest until pain stabs through his ribs on all sides. Tears threaten to push from his eyes, pinching his nose, rumbling in his ears like shore break at sea.

George's door closes down the hall, and his breath sags out of him. Dream knows it will be locked. He knows better than to give eyes to his mirrored reflection on the way out; knows the red flush on his own dry cheeks would unleash a saltwater flood nothing except George's arms wrapped around him could ever begin to stop.

(9:09 P.M) there's tea outside your door. take it or leave it

(9:09 P.M) [Attachment: Image]

Dream's phone lays flat on his chest, and his eyes tack onto his ceiling fan. His own mug seeps memoried wisps of steam, green leaves, sitting on pillows in his living room after sunset, yet the ceramic cup sits in solitude on his nightstand next to blank journal pages. He tried to put it into words. He tried. He tried and nothing large enough could ever be filtered down into letters and syllables and fragments of phrases to capture the exhaustion imbuing his limbs.

He walks over the worn path of their day in his mind again. He woke up next to George, and George woke up next to him. They made lunch, his face was framed, he wrote down a cake recipe.

George cried in his bathroom.

He made tea.

Patches curls up next to his side by the window where George usually lays, and her sleeping sides puff in and out with blissful ignorance. His bedroom is ajar, and the longer he waits to hear the creak open of George's door, even a subtle close once the peace offering is rescued from the hallway floor, the less he wants to sleep.

Anything could be waiting for him behind the dark of his eyes. He stares at the ceiling as the edges blend into a hazy gray.

*Anything, anything.*

A violent buzz stings across his chest and he tears the phone from his ribs, heart pounding until the assaulting noise becomes familiar in his ears. In a series of chimes, below the contact of George's name, an incoming call faces him patiently.

His eyebrows draw together, and an exhale tumbles down from his nose. His pillow climbs on the sides of his face as he sinks further into their muffling embrace.

He draws the call to his ear. Radio silence hums through the line.

Finally, George's voice pushes through. He says, "Thank you."

Dream's eyes flutter shut. A ghost must live in his home, able to pass through doors and retrieve mint tea without a creak or hint or breath in his direction.

"How are you feeling?" Dream asks quietly.

Digital numbers counting the call tick away. He can hear George breathing; faintly.

"I'm not ready to go back to this," George whispers.

"Please." Dream's grip tightens on the phone. "Please come here."

"...You're not angry with me?"

Patches stirs and steps across wrinkled covers, her paws carefully prodding Dream's chest before clambering on. His free palm rises to gently drift over her small spine.

"I am," Dream confesses, and his chest is kneaded through gray fabric. Purring rumbles against his tired heart.

"Okay," George says.

Dream pulls the phone from his face and quietly disconnects the call. Footsteps approach his doorway. He barely moves when George comes in besides the bend of his knees to let him clamber on the bed, past his and Patches' melded form, and his legs slide back down as the room settles over them.

George nudges up the blinds to set his tea on the windowsill, and a sliver of moonlight bars the sheets between them. Dream reaches for the lamp, shoulder straining, and they're plunged back into darkness with a silent *click*.

His eyes grow heavy on the unmoving blades of the fan. If he turned, George's back would be towards him. If he shifted the purring weight on his chest to check, Patches would complain.

“I went over it a thousand times,” George says suddenly, words carrying from what already feels like an ocean away. “I don’t understand what I did wrong.”

Dream slowly rests his cheek on the pillow and gazes at George’s silhouette.

“Everyone looked over it,” George continues in a whisper. “My family, my parents, their friends from work who had done it before and gotten it back and they all said it was *perfect*.”

“It’s only going to hurt you trying to figure out why,” Dream says softly.

“I just—I wanted—I wanted this to be *easy*.”

His chest aches. “George.”

“I wanted it to be real, not through a screen.” The thickness of oncoming tears coats George’s voice. “If we were gonna—*do* this, it had to be real. It had to. I was so—” His breath hiccups. “So tired of it not being real.”

Dream reaches recklessly, fingers loosely catching the end of his sleeve. His touch hangs. He’d pull George in and brush the tears from his cheeks if he could, kiss his face, cradle him close, not sleep until they both sleep and hold him for three days straight.

George’s elbow pushes back into his hand, and Dream breathes out. His hand slides down the warm length of his arm, brushing gently, giving the entirety of his body to the connected seconds of skin on skin.

“I can’t go back there,” George confesses. “I can’t go back to missing you.”

Their fingers slot together in a fragile reach across the mattress. Dream squeezes tight, and George painfully clings back, gravity centering in their palms and threatening to cave the distance.

Dream’s lips split, parting beneath the dark silence, yet no words are breathed from them.

“Say it,” George pleads, fingertips curling onto the back of his knuckles. “Whatever it is, I—I need to hear you say it.”

“...I have a session tomorrow at noon,” Dream mutters, “and I think you should come with me.”

## Chapter End Notes

i am nervous.

happy june :)

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